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# *STRANGE DARK STORIES*

ARTICLES ON VIDEO GAME CULTURE



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## INTRODUCTION

I have been an avid video game player since a very young age, playing on my computer the first adventures of Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series, and a few (now vintage) first person action games like *Duke Nukem 3D* and *Blake Stone: Aliens of Gold*. I always loved the action / adventure element that was prominent in such games, especially the *Tomb Raider* ones; the extraordinary real-life sites that Lara would visit in her quests ignited in me a love for further exploring the themes in her adventures, starting off with the geographical / historical / cultural aspect. A few years later, I discovered the amazing world of the *Resident Evil* game series, which instantly captivated me with their fantastic lead characters, their multi-layered plots and their complex and fascinating subtexts. Both the good guys and the bad guys in the *Resident Evil* universe are characterized by a rich, well-built background, something that results in the games being a very unique experience when you play them. In the latest years, I delved into the world of the renowned *Assassin's Creed* series, which combine my two favorite gameplay styles, action and adventure, with yet one more style that I absolutely love, which is stealth. Like the aforementioned series, the *Assassin's Creed* games as well feature amazing lead characters, beautiful plotlines and unforgettable villains, all these being part of stories that take place during important historical times, in real-life sites and with the active participation of historical personalities as well. With time, I realized that what games like these have in common and intrigued me so much, apart from the great amount of information that they provided, was their literary value; and the fact that their characters had depth and complexity, elements that would eventually lead to analysing their actions and decisions like one would do with the protagonists of a book or a movie. I have so far played quite a few games that belong to the Action / Adventure genre (ie, *Deus Ex* series, *Bioshock: Infinite*), as well as Survival Horror ( the two gorgeous games of *The Evil Within* series among others), almost always keen on exploring their gameplay in the highest difficulty levels if such a feature is available. In 2016 I started *Strange Dark Stories* (<http://www.strangedarkstories.com>), a blog dedicated to video game culture, which hosts my articles covering aspects of contemporary and retro video games that go beyond the obvious and the ordinary. Among the themes that are analysed in the articles are the following: character analysis, symbolism in video games, video games and modern culture, art in video games, literary references, film references, the colours as magical elements of puzzles and urban themes. This edition features a very small selection of these articles, written between 2016 and 2024.

## LINKS

Website: <http://www.strangedarkstories.com>

Gaming Channel (No Commentary): <https://www.youtube.com/@hisbrokenbutterfly>

Gaming Channel (Greek Commentary): <https://www.youtube.com/@NerinBloom>

Gaming blog: <http://hisbrokenbutterfly.blogspot.com/>

Personal blog: <https://thesecretgoldfishnb.blogspot.com/>

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## THE COLOURS AS MAGICAL ELEMENTS OF PUZZLES: THE GALLERY PUZZLE IN *RESIDENT EVIL HD REMASTER*



Although we encounter colour-related puzzles in numerous games - and several *Resident Evil* games, for that matter - some of them are majorly prominent in the games where they are included and moreover seem to be closely connected in several ways to the characters that participate in the respective plots. In *Resident Evil HD Remaster*, there is a puzzle in the Spencer mansion that involves four vitrail paintings. It is located in the narrow U-shaped gallery at the far side of the villa, a place to which you gain access after getting the Armor Key. It is located opposite the short corridor that leads outside to the inner garden.

This gallery consists of two parallel narrow corridors now inhabited by crows; interestingly enough, if you press the wrong buttons, the otherwise harmless birds will instantly attack you severely. As you enter the room, there is one oil painting to your left, depicting three knights, with a message below it. It reads: "Bring the light of truth to the three spirits". There are three double-faced vitrail paintings (you can see them from both corridors of the gallery) that show a sage wearing a pendant, a saint wearing a crown and a valiant wearing a bracelet. At the other end of the gallery, there is another vitrail painting, depicting a beautiful woman who is wearing a green crown, a yellow bracelet and a purple pendant. There is a writing under the painting, defining the woman as "Lisa, protected by the three spirits". The puzzle requires you to press the correct buttons under the first three paintings so as to match the colours on the woman's portrait. More specifically, what you have to do is to press the buttons under the three paintings on the correct side and in the correct order so that they light up the right way: The valiant wearing a bracelet must light up in orange colour, the sage wearing a pendant must become purple, the saint with the crown has to go green.

When all the paintings appear in the correct colour, the wall with Lisa's painting will raise up, revealing a hidden exit to a small yard. You could spot this yard from nearly the start of the game, but it was impossible to enter there before, because its gate was locked. Entering from the gallery's revealed passage, you can now unlock that gate with an old key, thus gaining a most necessary shortcut in the mazy mansion.

Lisa, the one protected by the three spirits, is the woman depicted in the portrait; she is also the hideous creature that strolls around the forest and the lower courtyards of the mansion. Lisa once was human, but after some failed experiments carried out on her, she became no less than a monstrosity. The three spirits that protect Lisa are represented by the three men shown in the three portraits on the walls of the gallery. Each one of these men holds a colour of identity and, due to this, seems to be somewhat connected to each one of the main male characters of the game.

Barry Burton, Jill Valentine's companion in her side of the story, is shown wearing a reddish vest that is close to orange. Barry is a family man, he adores his wife and two daughters, and he is also a

brave and loyal officer; he is a protector by definition, although at some point he almost betrayed his partners while being blackmailed by Wesker. From this aspect, Barry may be connected to the valiant in the orange light, shown in the gallery's painting; and Barry's 'bracelet' could be either his bond with his family which he could never let go, but could also indicate the connection that he has to his partners whom he would never possibly let down; or it could very well be both.

Chris Redfield, one of the two main playable characters of the game, is wearing a green vest; but not only here - in almost all his appearances in the *Resident Evil* games, he is shown to be wearing green (it is also the main colour of the BSAA uniforms, so his preference is kind of obligatory; not to mention how much it fits him). This prominent and recurring element could connect Chris to the saint with the crown that lights up in green. His full name being Christopher, Chris, like the saint with the same name, seems to always be holding stuff from one 'world' to another (both literally and metaphorically), protecting precious things and values from imminent dangers. His 'crown' is of course his heroic status and excellent marksmanship.

Albert Wesker, the arch-villain of the game, is wearing a blueish to dark purple shirt. Wesker may be an evil man, but he is also extremely gifted. Why he decided to use his brains to serve the evil side, is another story; the fact that remains is that he is a genius. Consequently, Wesker might as well represent the sage lit in purple; and his 'pendant' is the legacy that he holds, all that rare scientific knowledge that he used the wrong way.

Then we get to the 'protection' part; how are these three men, practically unrelated to Lisa, actually protecting her - and in what way? Lisa is nothing more than a lost soul now, wandering around the dungeons of the Spencer mansion, harming people because there is little else she can do; and obviously she cannot kill herself because she has lost all the human qualities and has neither will of her own nor conscience. Chris, Wesker and Barry all essentially 'help' her die; in the final confrontation with her in the cave where her mother's grave is located, Chris and Wesker work together to send her to her death.

In that same place, in Jill's side of the story (and assuming you choose to play nice and have Jill keep her trust in Barry and give him back his magnum after having grabbed it from him when he attempted to shoot her) Barry helps his partner get rid of Lisa by shooting her with his magnum while Jill pushes away the cement blocks.

In both storylines, Lisa finds her mother's skull in the coffin, which obviously brings to the surface a little part of her human self, subsequently waking up her sentiment, and she kills herself by falling down the chasm. Given the tragic state in which she's been for years, her death seems to be the only deliverance. In that sense, the three spirits / the valiant, the knight and the sage / Barry, Chris and Wesker, protect her in a sense, by causing her to find fragments of her human soul and free herself from her misery.

14 February 2017



## RESIDENT EVIL: CODE VERONICA AS A BILDUNGSROMAN



Although Claire Redfield made her first appearance in *Resident Evil 2* and became very popular thanks to it, it was not until *Resident Evil: Code Veronica* that her character gained more substance and depth, setting the ground for further development of her personality. This was also aided by the progress on the technical and graphical field, which favoured the realistic design of movements and expressions, as well as the creation of the necessary atmosphere thanks to the better environments and visual effects. These were the ideal conditions for Claire to live one of the most fascinating and unforgettable adventures in gaming history. *Code Veronica* takes place shortly after the events of *Resident Evil 2*. Claire had been to Raccoon City looking for her brother Chris, and as soon as she arrived there she found the whole area inhabited by zombies. While struggling to make it out of the nightmare alive, she met Leon Kennedy, who was a rookie then, and later little Sherry Birkin. By the end of the game, Claire left Leon and Sherry and continued her quest for Chris.

Putting several puzzle pieces together, she arrived in Paris and infiltrated the local Umbrella headquarters. Her presence is noticed soon, and she gets arrested and sent in a solitary prison, on the Rockfort Island, somewhere in the Northern Atlantic. Upon waking up in her cell, she realizes that nearly all the humans on the island (prisoners and guards) have become zombies. This is quite familiar to her, however she soon finds out that she hasn't seen anything yet.

*Code Veronica* has more common elements with the very first *Resident Evil*, but goes one step further, adding in its cast enemies with deranged psyche who are unable to explain or rationalize their obsessions. If Albert Wesker in the first *Resident Evil* was a conceited power-hungry man with a twisted Messiah syndrome and William Birkin in *Resident Evil 2* was a deluded scientist who became the victim of his own research, Alfred Ashford in *Code Veronica* is a half-crazy obsessive officer who lives with the ghost of his beloved dead sister and goes to such extremes as to impersonate her from time to time. So Claire has to face a rather complicated enemy, who may not be famous for his intelligence but has such an unstable and perplexed character that he can become dangerous before you can blink an eye.

Throughout her development in the game, Claire carries the characteristics of a Bildungsroman heroine. A Bildungsroman, aka a 'coming-of-age story', is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood in which character change is extremely important. In its development, the main themes it features are: a search for meaning for the young hero; an inciting incident puts the young hero into the journey, which will not be an easy one; there is an epiphany that changes everything; the young hero finds his/her place into society.

Claire, who is 19 years old at the time of the *Code Veronica* events, has a warm and loving relationship with her brother, and the two are very close. She is proud of him and he has taught her

several combat moves and how to use weapons. However her essential role in life starts as soon as she is urged to go looking for him after he disappears. Chris's disappearance is the inciting incident that marks the beginning of Claire's journey.

It is notable that said journey is both literal and metaphorical. It is literal because she is actually travelling to France but it is mainly metaphorical as she is transported to a different world, where fear and horror dominate, a world where she will have to battle all sorts of obstacles and face insane enemies in order to make it through.

Claire's coming-of-age journey is far from being easy. Alfred Ashford, who is the prison supervisor on the island, sees her as an enemy from the start and is determined to make her suffer and eventually kill her. Luckily for Claire, however, he is quite timid and cowardish, which keeps him hidden in the shadows and he resorts to setting traps in his attempts to discourage her. The several zombies that emerge from all sides are his unintentional allies. However Claire is not alone in this nightmarish journey. Early on in the game, she meets Steve Burnside, a young boy who was a prisoner as well, but for some reason wasn't affected by the biohazard attack and is still human. Steve becomes her ally and friend and it's not long before he falls in love with her (the Redfields are irresistible); and although the main concern of them both is to escape, later Steve's feelings will be responsible for their adventure taking a rather fatal turn later on.

After passing through Alfred's painful trials, they manage to get on a plane and leave the island. However the plane crashes and they find themselves in another Umbrella facility somewhere in Antarctica. There, among frozen rooms, poisonous moths and zombies coming to life, they struggle to find a way to escape once again. Eventually they come up with a plan, which involves operating a crane carrying a mining drill which will break open a wall of ice, creating an exit. While at it, Steve is distracted gazing at Claire, the mining drill gets momentarily out of control and crashes on a pipe, breaking it in half and releasing toxic gas in the room. As a result of this complication, Claire and Steve's escape gets postponed for a short time, during which however not only Alfred is able to catch up with them and they are forced to fight with him face to face, but moreover Alexia awakens from her slumber and attacks them, trapping them in the facility.

Meanwhile Chris arrives at Rockfort Island looking for Claire and finds the prison grounds almost completely destroyed. Chris has his fair share of the Bildungsroman hero in his part, although his story is not a coming-of-age one. Chris is already an experienced officer and is totally conscious and aware of the situations he is called to face. But as far as he is concerned, he witnesses a revelation when he discovers that Wesker, his former captain in S.T.A.R.S., is the evil mastermind behind the destruction of the Rockfort Island and the events that followed as inevitable consequences.

Eventually he flies to Antarctica where he finds Claire trapped in a cocoon inside a construction which looks like a replica of the Spencer Mansion. Chris frees Claire like a proper knight would do, and the two siblings finally reunite. Still, their problems are not over; now they have to face Alexia and they also need to locate Steve. Claire goes searching for him and when she finds him, it's the last thing she wanted to witness. Alexia has injected Steve with the Veronica virus and now he is infected, which causes him to mutate and attack Claire against his will. This is the epiphany in Claire's story: her former friend becomes an enemy who wants to kill her, but because his love for her is very strong, he manages to control himself and refuses to do it at just the last minute. This causes Alexia's rage, and she hits him lethally. Steve manages to express his feelings to Claire just before he dies. Considering Claire's later life choices, we can safely say that the events in Rockfort Island and Antarctica formed her personality, boosted up her perception and awareness and were significantly responsible for her decision to enroll in Terra Save, the organization that offered help

and support to victims of bioterrorism. Thus Claire found both a meaning and her place in society, completing her role as a Bildungsroman heroine.

But it's not only in the major points that Claire's story has the features of a Bildungsroman. Several of Claire's in-game decisions and actions may affect the way things turn out both for her and her co-protagonists.

At the start of the story, while she is in her cell, her guard Rodrigo is seriously wounded and is losing blood. This is a minor plot point which the player can either ignore or take into account. While looking for clues in Alfred's Training Facility, Claire finds a bottle of hemostatic. It's up to her (and the player) to decide whether or not she is willing to take a detour at that point and go back to Rodrigo to give him the hemostatic. If she does go back, Rodrigo will use the hemostatic and he will be cured, and to show her his gratitude, he will give her his lockpick - an item which is not necessary for the completion of the game, but which opens several briefcases and lockers that contain very useful items. Claire then will give him her lighter, as a thank-you gift. When Chris arrives on the island, he will meet Rodrigo, but soon after the poor guy will be attacked by the Gulp Worm, Alfred's mutated pet. There is no cure for Rodrigo this time, but before he dies he will give Chris the lighter that Claire had offered him. With the lighter in his inventory, Chris will gain access to a couple of very rewarding spots.

If however Claire decides to not go back to Rodrigo with the hemostatic, the man will die, she will never get the lockpick and thus Chris won't be able to receive the lighter, automatically losing his chance to fill his inventory with extra guns and ammo.

Another example of the bildungsromanesque character of secondary events is the boss fight with Nosferatu in Antarctica. Nosferatu, who is in fact the mutated father of Alfred and Alexia, is not a tough boss, but he is very toxic (literally) and if Claire doesn't kill him quickly, he may be able to poison her. His poison is not like the standard one from the spiders and moths, so, unlike that one, it can't be cured with a blue/green herb mix. If Nosferatu succeeds in poisoning Claire, when Chris arrives in Antarctica and frees his sister from the cocoon trap, she won't be able to go on and the game won't progress unless he goes back to the Armory room and finds the Serum that is needed for her to be cured.

Most Bildungsroman stories have a happy ending; even if there is loss and death connected to it. Reaching the conclusion, the young hero/heroine has learned a life lesson and has become mature enough and ready to follow his/her own path. *Code Veronica* has a generally good finale, with Chris and Claire flying away from Antarctica towards freedom. Both of them, however, have a thorn in their side. Chris, after his confrontation with Wesker minutes before, knows that his former chief will be his sworn enemy from now on and that he won't give up until he manages to realise his evil plans. And as for Claire, she won't be able to forget Steve so easily; the life lesson she learned was a tough one and affected her completely, leaving several marks on her, both physical and emotional.

3 October 2017



## THE BIZARRE FUTURISTIC PARADISE OF *DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION* & *DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED*



The year is 2027. Biotechnology has achieved giant steps and now people have the chance to replace or boost parts of their body with hi-tech mechanical limbs, so that they are more effective and productive in their work and other activities. This seemingly ideal evolution however hides lots of traps because, on the one hand the robotic limbs, no matter how perfect they may be, remain machines that can go wonkers at any time, and on the other there are always people willing to take advantage of such a promising technology for their own personal gain - be it sheer ambition or desire for riches.

Two years later, the world is divided between the 'natural' and the 'augmented' people. This is, in a nutshell, the setting of *Deus Ex*, as we see it in the last two video games of the series, *Human Revolution* and *Mankind Divided* and, more specifically, through the eyes of their protagonist, agent Adam Jensen. The message that the basic story of those two games carries is more than obvious: racism, social exclusion, acceptance of diversity or lack thereof, and also about how the thoughtless use - or better, overuse - of modern technology can have devastating consequences.

The beautiful and epic *Human Revolution* is a grim and gloomy futuristic tale that narrates how taking advantage of technology can make you prosper or ruin your life and the world around you, while in the equally charming and immersive *Mankind Divided*, the damage seems to already have been done, as the 'natural' people are more often than not extremely suspicious – hostile, even – towards the augmented citizens.

A gifted and intelligent ex-cop, Adam Jensen was one of the victims of a vicious attack that caused him multiple mutilations. While he was comatose on the surgical bed, his boss, David Sarif, owner and developer of advanced prosthetic technologies, decided to replace several of his destroyed limbs with mechanical ones. Upon waking up, the new Adam has, among other things, robotic legs and arms, mechanical breathing system, improved vision, and a brain chip that allows him to 'scan' the character of the people he interacts with, subsequently being able to influence their course of thought and reaction.

Adam, the enigmatic David Sarif, specialized genetist Megan Reed who also happens to be Adam's ex-girlfriend, tech guru and hacker Frank Pritchard, Jim Miller, Adam's boss in Prague, Alex and Farida, the tough pilot girls, Vaclav Coller, (mad) scientist and Adam's doctor and friend, are all part of a different world where everything, from science and medicine to fashion and art, are viewed through a futuristic and post-apocalyptic prism.

Detroit in 2027, as it is depicted in *Human Revolution*, seems like it comes straight out of a science fiction movie, with its aerial railways and hyper-modern apartment buildings looking compelling

and mysterious in the gloomy lighting. As most of the story takes place in the afternoon and night, the light sources are mainly electric, something that adds a lot to this atmosphere of artificiality and coldness. The yellow tones dominate, coming to contrast with the dark backgrounds. There are people in the streets, but everybody is either sulky or ready for a fight.

Prague in 2029, which is the main setting of *Mankind Divided*, seems to have incorporated all the modern elements and combined them with its traditional ones. Which is why we see elaborate subway stations and futuristic offices, as well as scenic parks and vintage-looking houses. Here there is a lot of action taking place in plain daylight, and we can admire the bright colours in the gardens, the graffiti on walls, the blue sky, the colourful windows of the stores.

However in both cases we notice that underneath the evolved surface, nothing has truly changed in the essence: drug dealers, ruthless gangs, organized crime still carry out illegal activities in the margins of society, within the limits of an underworld that has way too much in common with the one of good old yesteryears. At the same time, the ordinary world goes on with its everyday routine. Only that now, among the 'natural' people, exist those who have undertaken mechanical augmentations and, after some point, are considered outcasts of society. In *Mankind Divided*, we can see this very clearly, when Adam takes the subway train for 'natural' people by mistake: some of the passengers look at him with contempt and anger - still, he manages to remain cool.

With the supporters of this new reality on the one side, its devoted enemies, who wish for a completely purged and natural human nature, on the other, and above everyone else those who want to use the new technology to gain power and manipulate the world, Adam finds himself in a whirlwind of events that affect him in more than one ways. Adam is an augmented man and therefore belongs, technically, to the first group. His moral values, however, are in constant conflict with this, because on the one hand 'he never asked for this' and on the other he is not sure what kind of life he would prefer, supposing he had been given the chance to choose. Just like his namesake Adam of the Bible, Adam was created (or better, re-created) not exactly from dust but from the remains of his human self. But still, his thoughts and feelings remain 100% human, something that is constantly in debate with the almost supernatural powers that he has gained thanks to his advanced transplants and their hi-tech enhancements.

Unlike Frank, who willingly and consciously chose to get his brain augmentation, or Megan, who views the whole matter from a strictly scientific aspect even if this means the impingement of anything moral, Adam is always concerned whether what he does is right or not. He is, in the essence, a marginalized anti-hero who may get compliments about his impressive looks, but he is also the target of unfair and offensive comments due to the fact that he is augmented.

It's not easy at all for Adam to adapt to the new conditions, however in *Mankind Divided* we find him more stoic and cynical, something that was expected to happen anyway since in *Human Revolution* he had discovered that both Megan and David had taken advantage of him and had, more or less, betrayed him in a way. And although he got to a compromise with David, his relationship with Megan was never restored. It is notable that while he started off being so close with Megan and David, he ended up alienated from them, while his relationship with Frank, although it was antagonistic at first, then moved to a sui generis level of friendship and respect.

Equally, in *Mankind Divided* Adam's relationship with his boss passes through thick and thin. Jim Miller, head chief of Interpol's Task Force 29, is a tough and decisive commander and soldier, but is also a man with a tumultuous and unusual family life. Miller looks cold and insensitive, but Adam, who is able to see behind the surface, can discern and estimate all the good sides of his chief's character. And Miller deep down always liked Adam and trusted him, both as an agent and a friend, although he did not always let it show.

In the charming universe of the two games, the characters appear in outfits that look like contemporary ones, but are also combining both vintage and futuristic elements. Same goes for the environments and the objects that we see in them. In the apartments we can see hi-tech devices next to gramophones or old-style display cases. Megan is seen wearing very modern leather pants and boots with metallic details, but she also has a pearl pendant hanging round her neck. Men's fashion is characterized by the same fusion style, with stylish boots and vests combined with classic shirts and haircuts.

This mix of time and style points to the fact that modern man is afraid of and unable to handle all the knowledge and information that are received everyday and is still clinging to the past to look for ideas, inspiration or simply for something to behold, since the future, as fascinating as it may be, will always remain uncertain and vague. The undergrounds of the cities, however, still remain the same: dark, filled with dangers and mysteries – just like the human subconscious. Secret cults, cruel mafia bosses, serial killers roam the sewers and basements, waiting for the right moment to show themselves and demonstrate all the evil that they can do. The lethal gangs of Derelict Row in *Human Revolution* will stop at nothing to impose themselves in Detroit and establish their 'kingdom'. Otar Botkoveli in *Mankind Divided* is an old school Mafioso whom Adam is able to tame by talking to him the right way, but who will very easily go mad when Adam ignores his request and will take revenge on him in a most painful way.

The politicians and their strategies are not much different from the past either: demagoguery, direct or indirect mass manipulation, taking all means necessary to establish power, everything that was always happening, is still happening and is doomed to go on happening as long as there are people on this planet. The rich are richer, the poor rarely manage to make their life better, the multinational corporations are spread everywhere. And all this, under the illusive veil of fake prosperity that the abundance of material things create. This image of the future is more or less like Adam; impressive and evolved on the surface, but with an inner melancholy that has become part of its being and is almost impossible to go away.

10 December 2017

## PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A SERIAL KILLER



"I am Stefano... And now you are my art."

Stefano Valentini is a major villain and the main antagonist for the first half of *The Evil Within 2*, sequel of *The Evil Within*. He is a deranged photographer and serial killer with a very dark and twisted psyche, and is quite possibly one of the most intriguing and complicated villains in video game history so far. His role in the story is completed in the 8th of the 17 chapters of the game, however his emblematic presence and personality as a villain offer material for plenty of analysis, both about himself alone, as well as concerning his relationship with the protagonist of the game, detective Sebastian Castellanos.

The plot of the game is centered around Sebastian's daughter, Lily, who was announced dead after a fire that burned her family home, something that was known already from the first game. In *The Evil Within 2*, however, Sebastian finds out that Lily is very much alive, and is in fact held in STEM by Mobius, the secret organization that stole Ruben Victoriano's research and developed it so as to create the necessary means for universal mind control. As the STEM system needed a central unit, a core, to operate (Ruben's brain had this 'role' in the first game), Mobius tested several people for this, narrowing the candidates down eventually to children, whose pure brain would be a perfect 'blank sheet' for the process to progress smoothly. Lily was chosen as the ideal candidate because she was an intuitive girl with an innocent heart, and was subsequently kidnapped so as to take her place in the main STEM unit. When Sebastian's wife, Myra, found out about this, she became a member of Mobius, planning a way to take her daughter out and destroy the organization from the inside afterwards. Something went wrong however when Lily disappeared completely and the system became destabilized.

Sebastian is called to enter STEM and go to Union, a virtual environment that simulates a town and which was created by Mobius for its test subjects, to look for his daughter, as well as for the members of the search team that had been sent previously to find her but went missing too. Sebastian finds out that one of the people who was supposedly helping Myra with her plan secretly wanted to keep Lily for himself so as to gain personal power using her potential, and for this he sent Stefano Valentini to kidnap her for his own benefit. However Stefano found out about Lily's 'power' and he decided against handing her over, thinking that, with taking advantage of her abilities, he would achieve great works of art.

Although Stefano is clearly identified and defined as a psychopathic and sadistic serial killer who has developed an appalling concept about what great art is, his connection to Sebastian and how this affects his attitude as the story progresses presents great interest. But this cannot be examined separately from his works of 'art' - photographs and installations - that can be seen in several places, and their evolution.

First of all we should focus a bit on an important fact about his past life. Stefano used to be a war photographer, and given that he is 31 at the time of the game's events, we can easily deduct that he had been on such missions while at a very young age. This fact alone should be enough to explain part of his paranoia, as it is more than obvious that, as a war photographer, he had witnessed and captured with his camera numerous horrible scenes. What made the biggest difference in his case however and practically altered his psyche was an incident where while photographing a war scene, he captured the moment when a man died, hit by an explosion; the same explosion that caused the loss of his own right eye. The fact that he managed to capture the exact moment of death fascinated him and after getting back home, he became a fashion photographer using this activity as a cover, planning to put to practice the twisted artistic projects that started occupying his mind.

There are several recurring elements and themes in his older photographs and installations, which can be seen in various rooms in the City Hall, the most characteristic being the red roses and the violet blue color (which also resembles the color of the suit he is wearing). These photographs and installations all depict women, albeit their head is always missing or is replaced by the flowers. What Stefano did to create his 'art' was to kill his victims and set up installations with the corpses which he then shot with the camera and edited accordingly to create a misleading artistic effect (that is, he edited the photos to make them look as if he had created all the gruesome effects with photographic or computer tricks, but in fact they were 100% real).

Soon his concepts became more specific, as he focused on capturing the moment of death, somehow reviving again and again that first random capture in the battlefield; and to achieve this, he had his camera ready and hit the button just as he was stabbing or shooting his models with a gun. Although one such photo can be seen in the City Hall and it shows a woman, it is quite interesting that almost all the others of this kind that Sebastian comes across depict men who, moreover, are soldiers - except the young man in the white shirt near the start.

Being exposed to the horrors of war at such a young age, Stefano was inevitably traumatized, something that took irreversible monstrous dimensions after the event with the explosion that turned on his psychopathic switch. Clearly the paranoia that he showed afterwards was connected to the war in every way, but initially he would express it in more indirect ways, which is why his victims were female fashion models and he obviously devoted a lot more time in staging and editing his photos. As soon as his most crucial memory settled itself in his mind, his photos started being more specific. He started killing soldiers, seen now as direct symbols of war, and photographing the moment of their death; and the captured result showed exactly that, with no extra additions or effects. He went even further than that though, by creating some kind of live installations with his victims, framing them in a real-time camera shot which would loop eternally, repeating the captured moment of death again and again.

In these installations, these frozen displays, as they are called in the game, it is as if time has stopped; the moment of the victim's death plays over and over in slow motion, the scene is bathed in a gloomy and sick blue light, while in the background is heard a distorted version of Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*, Op 48, I.

This ingenious music segment seems to match Stefano's art from a technical aspect: Tchaikovsky creates harmony through dissonance and makes unconventional use of accords, still the resulting piece sounds immaculate. Similarly, Stefano's photos look artistic, albeit creepy, on the exterior, but in fact they are made of dead bodies and body parts. Of course Tchaikovsky uses disharmonies to create something beautiful, while Stefano's 'art' is literally a murder pile.

The most raw manifestation of this is the Guardian, a hideous monster made of severed limbs and cut heads stitched together, which runs around with a creepy smile stuck on its main head, yielding



a huge buzz saw that is attached on its arm, while letting out a chilling, hysterical laughter. The Guardian represents all of Stefano's victims who died violently and is some sort of evil spirit that seeks revenge. Its smile and laughter are a constant reminder of the moment that they were caught in Stefano's trap when he ordered them to smile for the camera, and from that moment and on, their nightmare began.

Near the closure of his role in the game, Stefano conceives and realizes a most bloodcurdling frozen display which involves several people - both men and women - who are all dressed in white and are sitting in the seats of a theater, with their hands and legs tied with duct tape and sacks covering their heads. Having attached explosive mechanisms on each one's head, he sets them all off at the same time, causing a series of explosions which create a visual effect that defies any description.

This mini-war that he creates himself in the theater brings him back to the start of his madness, to the explosion that marked his life both literally and metaphorically in the battlefield; only this time he has the illusion that he is the one in control of everything and everyone around him.

Stefano is, from many aspects, a fascinating villain. His appearance is stylish, classy, and marginally eccentric, with a toned-down flamboyant elegance. He is a young and handsome man, but his soul and his mind are of the worst kind of evil. His Italian descent gives him an air of charm and beauty that is the exact opposite of his real self. In that sense, he is more or less like his photographs. Art as a concept takes a distorted form in his head and is realized in the most disturbing ways. His missing eye has been replaced with a camera lens, which makes him see everything around him as photographic stills, even before he actually takes a photo.

Disappointed from what he considers to be a shallow approach of his work, he has created an alternate reality within the virtual reality of Union. He is able to alter the environment around him and transform it the way that he pleases, and thus he has turned several places of the town into his own personal artistic domain. The Grand Theater and the City Hall in particular are like some kind of Museums of Horror, where he has his artworks set around so that he is able to admire them as much as he wants and preserve them for eternity.

His chemistry with Sebastian is extremely intense and dominates everything else for the whole first half of the story. Sebastian is as clear and pure as Stefano is dark and perverted. This contrast becomes even more powerful when taking into consideration that Stefano is almost a decade younger than Sebastian, as it intensifies the fact that Sebastian has maintained his unadulterated heart despite the nightmares he's been through and the evil he has encountered, while Stefano not only succumbed to his dark side when he met the horror and evilness of war and embraced it, but moreover found pleasure in it.

Sebastian enters Stefano's twisted world rather unexpectedly at the very beginning of the game, when he finds himself in an empty and tall dark room, decorated with long, red curtains that swing slightly as if moved by a ghostly wind. The whole place looks like a dismantled theatrical stage. A bit further, he goes through a door and he enters a smaller room where there is a photo of a door on one wall and an identical real door on another. By looking at the photo of the door, Sebastian is able to open the real door behind him and proceed. It is as if the photo became reality; or maybe reality manifested itself as a photo so as to drag him in? Nothing is clear inside STEM, and most importantly, nothing is friendly. As Sebastian goes along a corridor, Tchaikovsky's music is heard from a distance, and soon Sebastian comes across a frozen display, featuring William Baker, the leader of the Mobius search team that went missing. The same room also hosts several photos on the walls, associated with other victims, that will reappear later on.

By revealing a secret passage nearby, Sebastian enters a bizarre and disturbing building with long corridors, red curtains and gory photos on the walls, which seems to be Stefano's private place as he can be seen walking around, teleporting himself from one place to another, changing the layout of the rooms, making doors appear or disappear. A woman that you see crying for help behind a glass door disappears seconds after, and it is just Stefano and Sebastian alone in the artist's domain.

Sebastian is not just one more random victim for Stefano. This becomes very clear from the start, from the first time that the two of them cross paths. In the room where Sebastian sees Stefano for the first time, where Stefano stabs a young man then shoots him with his camera, Sebastian hides behind a couch after witnessing the scene. As Stefano passes by him, he stops for a moment, throws a look sideways to the direction where Sebastian is crouching and literally smells him, letting out a lustful groan.

Moving on, Sebastian goes down to the basement where there is a storage room full of hanging corpses. This very interesting room is in fact a stripped down version of the vicious circle in which Stefano has willingly trapped himself. And the word vicious in his case is rather literal. When you first enter the room, it has several corpses covered with sheets, hanging from the ceiling. As you approach the back wall, you can see a mural depicting a huge artistic eye, made with what looks like red paint but is probably human blood.

Just as you get closer, a noise makes you turn towards the opposite direction. You see then that the entrance from where you came in has disappeared and instead there is a solid wall there, and a mounted camera standing in front of it. A new noise makes you move to the back of the room again, and now a door has magically appeared where the eye initially was. As Sebastian opens the door, Stefano appears in front of him and shoots him with his camera. Turning towards the opposite direction again, Sebastian sees that the hanging corpses have been replaced with piles of stuff covered with cloth, and now there is a mirror on the wall where the mounted camera was minutes before; and on the mirror Sebastian finds the photo of himself that Stefano shot a few seconds before. The corpses, the mounted camera, Stefano with his own camera in hand, and a new victim, Sebastian: this scenery not only sums up Stefano's repeated activities in Union but moreover describes perfectly the confusion and derangement of his mind.

As soon as Sebastian takes his photo from the mirror, he catches a glimpse of a black-haired woman dressed in red behind him. She disappears immediately and at the same time the Guardian shows up from behind the glass, shatters the mirror and prepares to attack Sebastian, whose only rescue is the passage behind the mirror. So Sebastian runs through the looking glass, with the Guardian breathing (rather, laughing) down his neck, but this is definitely no Wonderland he is seeing. Suddenly Stefano appears from the opposite direction and throws a knife at him, hitting him on the shoulder. The key in this scene is the fact that, with stabbing Sebastian, Stefano is actually offering him a knife. In other words, he gives him an item that is vital for surviving for the rest of the adventure. It is as if he wants Sebastian to follow him, and as he is luring him into his world, he is making sure that he has at least the basic means to defend himself.

A bit later in Union, while following a signal on his communicator in his search for two missing soldiers, Sebastian enters a basement room where he has a vision in which Stefano has captured Ryan Turner, one of the soldiers, whom he soon kills and photographs, creating yet one more frozen display. As Sebastian is leaving this room, Stefano shows up again in the opened door and takes one more photo of him, then disappears. Before getting back outside, Sebastian enters a creepy dark room where there is a photo of the frozen display he just saw, showing Ryan at the moment of his murder.

It looks like Stefano treated Ryan a bit differently than his rest of his victims, as there are a few details that hint to that: he tied Ryan down and kept him like this for a while before killing him, instead of just taking him by surprise or chasing him then shooting him, like he did with the others. Additionally, he obviously took the time to observe and study his victim, both before and after the murder: along the walls of the corridor that connects the room where Ryan's frozen display is and the last room where his photo is hanging on the wall, are several other photos focusing on details like his eye and his hands, his head at the moment of death from various angles, as well as others showing parts of his severed body; in one of those, Stefano has added a butterfly. Moreover, the photo that captured his death is large and framed, as if Stefano wanted it to stand out from the rest.

There is no specific hint that could explain why Stefano would have this different behaviour towards Ryan; besides, we only have the chance to know very few things about him. From the visions triggered by the resonances in Sebastian's communicator, we can see that he was a tall and slender young man, and that he was somewhat ruthless since he was the one who planned to proceed in the Alpha One emergency plan. We could assume that Stefano, in his attempt to create 'his greatest work yet', considered some victims to be more fitting for this than the others, for whatever sick reason; and Ryan was one of them.

Some time later, and after following Lily's voice via a signal, Sebastian enters a huge warehouse where his daughter sought refuge while being chased by Stefano. Once inside and in an upper room, Sebastian has a vision of Stefano searching for Lily and eventually finding her and dragging her out of her hiding place. While heading back outside, he sees Stefano again and runs after him. Seconds later, the words 'Smile For Me' appear on a wall at the end of a corridor and just at the exit, Stefano turns to the side and smells Sebastian the same way as before.

This is the point when Stefano decides to show Sebastian that he is very aware of his presence and that he wants to lead him somewhere. Before he disappears from that place, he activates the Aperture, a huge eye that covers Union's skyline, that has a camera lens in the place of the iris. With it, Stefano is able to watch Sebastian's movements all around Union, turning this into one more means to keep him on a tight leash.

Following a lead, Sebastian reaches the City Hall, which is isolated now that Union is slowly falling apart. The place looks and feels ominous, as if it is dominated by a dark presence - which indeed it is. As Sebastian approaches the main gate, Tchaikovsky's music piece starts playing again, this time through his communicator. The whole area is instantly overwhelmed by the familiar by now gloomy blue light and Stefano appears in the distance, luring Sebastian in his lair. As soon as he shows up, he stops for a second and turns towards his back, to make sure that Sebastian is following him.

Just at the entrance, Sebastian finds another photo of himself taken from a distance, with the words 'Waiting For You' written on it. Stefano wants to make it very clear to him that he is not only one step ahead constantly, but he is also watching him wherever he goes; therefore there is no way Sebastian can get away.

The interior of the City Hall is just as empty and haunting as the exterior was. Large, deserted rooms with photos on the walls, yet one more frozen display in one hall featuring a soldier falling from an upper floor, and just behind a bright blue curtain, a puzzle awaits. Sebastian has to recreate a photo that is hanging on a wall; this photo is, like Ryan's, large and framed, and it shows a girl wearing a blue dress and an emerald necklace round her neck, posing next to a vase with roses. What makes this photo even more interesting is that it does not feature a dead body for a change.

Still, it is no less creepy; the face of the girl is rubbed out, and the contrast of her bright blue dress and the red roses with the dusted dark background creates a chilling atmosphere that is transmitted

to the room around. When the task is completed, a new section opens up; a long corridor with more framed photos on the walls left and right, and the phrase 'Appreciate The Art' written with blood on the far wall, closed in an empty frame. Sebastian also finds a newspaper clipping with an article about the case of a woman, Emily Lewis, who was found dead while her body had been decapitated. Emily was a model and actress, and a long-time friend of Stefano who was also her photographer.

Emily is obviously the girl in the blue dress, and the long corridor that opens up beyond the room where her photo is hanging, is dedicated to her. Stefano took a proper photo of her at first while she was alive (the one in the hall) and then killed her; and all the framed photos in the corridor are showing parts of her body during and after her murder. Emily is yet another victim who, like Ryan, was treated differently from the others; although in this case there is an explanation: Emily was Stefano's friend before, unlike his other victims who were random people he didn't know. This corridor in the City Hall is not the only room dedicated to her; there are also several photos showing parts of her dead body in the foyer of the theater where Sebastian will go later, and in one of them, that is focusing on her black hair, Stefano has added a butterfly. Although this detail seems minor, it could be a clue that, with adding the butterfly, Stefano put some sort of mark on the victims that he considered unique. Emily was even 'honored' with a photo where she is shown to have butterfly wings - until you look more closely and realize what those wings really are.

This means that, since Sebastian is a unique victim too, he should have his butterfly. And indeed he has; his butterfly is actually Lily. Butterflies are associated with Lily in several ways, the most obvious and direct one having to do with something as simple and humble as the decoration of her room. But it goes even further and deeper than that. While Sebastian is investigating the case of the missing soldiers in the town, and just before going down to the basement where Ryan is held captive, a cryptic message appears on a wall, as if written with fire, warning him to not go there. Next to the words, there is a butterfly, which has a binary role: it serves as a bait for Sebastian, but also carries all the symbolism associated with Stefano's victims.

This long and twisted ritual that Stefano has prepared for Sebastian shows that the evil photographer sees our hero as his most unique victim for whom he has reserved a very special treatment before reaching the point of murder. He could very well capture Sebastian, kill him and photograph him just like he did with his previous victims, but instead he has set up a whole series of trials and tricks, until he decides it is time to introduce himself. Sebastian seems to be his only victim of whom he takes so many photos while still alive; and in these photos Stefano sadistically captures Sebastian's fear and anxiety. Nothing less than an extreme form of stalking; and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Stefano is more than likely obsessed with Sebastian on a sublevel; something that partly lies in the fact that Sebastian is Lily's father. Stefano may be a disturbed psychopath, but the intelligence that he had in his sane days is still there, so he is able to discern Sebastian's qualities that are very similar to Lily's - the high perception and guileless heart - which are exactly those responsible for her being chosen as the perfect core of STEM. Maybe subconsciously, he senses that Sebastian is like a grown-up version of Lily, so he may even go as far as to consider that if he were to use Sebastian somehow in the way that he plans to use Lily, he could create even greater things; but of course greatness is something very altered in Stefano's world.

The moment when Sebastian has Stefano within reach for the first time while in another room of the City Hall, is just when the latter shoots him with the camera, capturing him in a frozen display. Unlike Stefano's previous victims, Sebastian is still alive during the process, and Stefano decides that this is the perfect chance to introduce himself and declare Sebastian 'his art'. Stefano's speech can have many interpretations at that point, one being literal and another conveying something more complex and twisted. He devotes time to examine Sebastian's frozen display, cuts his cheek with a

dagger and seems to enjoy his agony too much, and in a way that goes a lot deeper than his standard sadism as a disturbed serial killer.

By capturing Sebastian in a frozen display, Stefano has a momentary victory and a few minutes' control over him. By cutting Sebastian's cheek, he puts his signature on his victim and marks him as 'his art'. All this makes the whole process look even more like a ritual and turns what would be a standard 'cat and mouse' chase into a twisted and sadistic game, that gets more and more complex and disturbing.

Later on, Stefano locks himself up in the town's Grand Theater, in another part of Union, but when Sebastian arrives there, he sees that the gate that leads inside is blocked by barbed wire and guarded by two framed photos. Following the advice of the team's psychologist, he sets on to locate the actual place where the photos are and destroy them, so as to make the barrier outside the theater disappear.

This sequence is extremely interesting and revealing, as it puts both Sebastian and us in the essence of Stefano's 'work'. The two photos are of course as creepy as one would expect, but there is something rather artistic about them. To destroy them, Sebastian has to literally get in their interior, where he sees what they are really made of: corpse parts stitched together and combined with more corpse parts.

The inevitable battle between Stefano and Sebastian comes soon after Stefano has Sebastian witness the realization of his gruesome concept in the theater. He teleports away and makes sure that the path leading to him crumbles down, but still it is relatively easy for Sebastian to reach him; because Stefano wants Sebastian to get to him, but he also wants to have the upper hand in this sadistic game until the last minute.

As Sebastian gets closer to him, Stefano can be heard mumbling stuff about creating something great, for which he also needs an audience to make it complete. His speech is inconsistent and vague, and somewhat misleading; he clearly isn't planning to create his next piece with Lily in the role of the victim, as this means he would need to kill her, and therefore miss all the supernatural powers that he has gained so far thanks to her; moments before, he declared that with the power of the Core (Lily) he would create his art forever, implying that he intended to keep her with him so as to be able to accomplish his sick artistic plans. Taking into consideration all the extremes to which he has gone so far in his twisted game with Sebastian, it more likely means that he has conceived a way to make use of Lily's full potential, so as to create a work of art featuring Sebastian, since he has already reserved a room especially for him.

When Sebastian arrives outside the room where Stefano awaits, it is revealed that it is a place he has seen before: when he first entered Stefano's domain, right after finding William Baker's frozen display, the entrance to that room was in a corridor, behind a locked metal gate, with a plaque on a pedestal standing at the front. Sebastian could see it through the bars but could not make out the details nor what was written on the plaque, but now he can see that it has his name engraved on it.

Stefano has plaques with the names of all of his victims placed outside the rooms that host their frozen displays or directly in front of them, but in all the other cases he obviously does this after killing them and having the displays ready, as his victims are chosen randomly or at least without any special preparations from his part. In Sebastian's case, however, he had already both the room and the plaque ready before Sebastian even had the chance to see him or know about him.

Sebastian's room is a large hall which looks like a gallery. This room, apart from resembling a lot the gallery room in Max's nightmare in *Life Is Strange*, where Mr Jefferson is chasing her, has yet



one more peculiarity: almost all the photos in it show close ups of eyes and mouths. We could say that the eyes stand for Stefano's missing eye which now is a camera, and the mouths represent the screams of his victims that he so enjoyed hearing. During the boss fight, you may have the chance to notice that the photos are moving; sometimes the eyes turn upside down, other times the mouths become bloody; they are all constantly changing.

Stefano uses his teleporting power to make things tough for Sebastian, while attempting to shoot him with his camera and capture him in an ideal frame. Every time he succeeds, he feels proud for his 'work' and praises himself, never failing to also praise Sebastian for being so perfectly frozen in time; and if Sebastian doesn't manage to move away from the frozen frame, Stefano rushes to him and stabs him with a fury that resembles lust too much, informing Sebastian that his death will be his 'masterpiece', leading even more to the confirmation that it is Sebastian whom he plans to make his 'greatest work yet'.

Eventually Sebastian defeats him, and as Stefano falls down, he says with a tone of admiration in his voice, that Sebastian turned him into a masterpiece and grabs his camera for 'one last photo'. Being so obsessed with the idea of capturing the moment of death, one would imagine that he wants to take a photo of himself while dying, so as to capture his own such moment for eternity. Surprisingly enough, he doesn't do this, but attempts to take a shot of Sebastian instead, before Sebastian shoots him through the camera with his gun at just the last minute.

Before that, and while he is dying, we have the chance to look at Sebastian through Stefano's camera eye for a moment, and see how Stefano views the world around him: it is like everything has a red filter on, which makes his surroundings resemble constantly a dark room. It is as if the photographer absorbed the man and his whole being is a camera.

In the first *Evil Within*, in chapter 4, *The Patient*, Sebastian gets inside a house with Dr Martinez, looking for Leslie. It is a house like all the others in the village, and it also has several framed photographs on the walls. Those photographs have a vintage look and they seem to have a concept, like they portray the life in the countryside. One of them is of a girl who looks strikingly like Lily.

Things get creepier though when Sebastian and the doctor get down to the basement, where Leslie is hiding in an isolated room. That room, which seems totally unrelated with the place around it, is a photographer's dark room with several photos hanging from the ceiling to dry, and there is also one wall that is almost covered with photographs. If you look closely, you will see that nearly all of those photos are shots of Sebastian.

When Sebastian enters Stefano's domain at the start of *The Evil Within 2*, the door leading to the room of his final fight with Stefano can be seen through the metal gate, and it already has the plaque with his name engraved on it at the front. And in the next hall, as Sebastian heads towards the stairs leading up, a phone rings; when Sebastian answers it, Stefano can be heard laughing maliciously from the other end of the line.

Additionally, the room in the City Hall where the stable field emitter is (where Sebastian comes face to face with Stefano for the first time) is bathed in red light when Sebastian first finds it. It has a photography umbrella on the one side and lots of smudged photos on the walls, bringing that bizarre room from the first game to mind. This one here is like a mock dark room and it is as if it is set up for a photoshoot. Then Stefano enters and captures Sebastian in a frozen display, and moments later he summons the Obscura (a monster that is made of body parts and an old-time camera) to attack Sebastian.

All these details, as well as the fact that Stefano was a citizen of Krimson City before entering STEM, could be hints that Stefano knew about Sebastian before the events in *The Evil Within 2*; and in fact it wouldn't come as a surprise if he was really stalking Sebastian all this time, from Krimson City already, both in the real world and inside STEM.

16 January 2018

## THE SYMBOLISMS OF *THE EVIL WITHIN*



Symbols are used extensively in video games, although many times we inevitably focus on the action factor and we may not notice them or not give them enough attention. Symbolism in itself is a great means of conveying hints and highlighting stuff, often shedding light on aspects that look secondary but are, in fact, much more important.

With its elaborate and complex story and its unforgettable characters, *The Evil Within* is a fortunate blend between Jane Jensen's *Gray Matter* and the *Resident Evil* game series. It is one of those captivating games that go far beyond the action level and, although its gameplay is of a very high standard, it offers a good deal of other elements that are worth noticing and analyzing. A game with such heavy imagery and such a powerful and compelling atmosphere could but feature numerous symbols, direct or indirect, major or minor, but all equally essential for a better understanding of scenes, characters, actions and reactions.

There are certain symbols that are very obvious, like Ruvik's monsters which represent several states of his mind and are depictions of his traumatic memories and as those affected his life and how he got to eventually live through them. But there are also some others that are worth examining, as they often develop along with the story's progression.

### Male and female symbols

The men and women in *The Evil Within* carry strong symbolisms which are manifested in several different ways. The main characters are four men (Sebastian Castellanos, Ruben Victoriano aka Ruvik, Joseph Oda and Leslie Withers) and three women (Juli Kidman, Laura Victoriano and Tatiana Gutierrez).

Sebastian as the archetypical male is the good and brave hero who struggles to survive in the collapsing world created by Ruvik's twisted mind. A gifted and educated detective with great skills, fair thinking, high intelligence, physical strength and attractive appearance, Sebastian, apart from symbolizing Good, gathers all the good elements that make a man admirable. In this light, he symbolizes masculinity with all its positive connotations.

His rival awe is, of course, Ruvik, a clear symbol of Evil, who has all the opposite characteristics: he is evil, ugly, deranged, ruthless and, essentially, a coward. Ruvik symbolizes a crooked and weak masculinity that, deep down is, technically and practically, almost non-existent. His only strong element is his ingenious mind which, however, he is using for evil activity. As he gains control over Sebastian, he can see that Sebastian is someone with an equally powerful mind which, however, he uses only for good things. Ruvik wants to infect Sebastian and attempt to make use of his bright brain for his own twisted plans.

Interestingly, Sebastian's female rival awe is not Kidman, as one would expect, but Laura. Ruvik's sister is an extremely strong and aggressive ghost with the terrifying form of a multi-armed spider-like creature. Pretty much like Myra in *The Evil Within 2*, Laura is the symbol of the Matriarch; a protector who, just like Myra, will attack lethally anyone who attempts to harm the person she loves the most. If she happens to catch Sebastian, she will kill him in a most vicious way, establishing her victory over a man who is a symbol of masculinity, taking her revenge, through him, against the people who caused the unjust ending of her life and those who murdered her brother. The fact that Sebastian is a good person does not interest her; for her, and for Ruvik who made a monster out of her in his memories, he is only a symbol and he is what he stands for, albeit unwillingly. Her soul won't rest unless Ruvik is stopped.

Kidman, for her own part, is more like an outcast, since Sebastian considers her a traitor; the irony is that she is an outsider in Mobius as well, as in there too she is partially a rebel: she won't comply to their orders and even if she will, it is because she has no other choice. We could say that Kidman's female identity is just typical; her role goes far beyond her status, and at this point the fact that she is a woman does not matter. Everybody calls her Kidman or Kid - even Leslie. It is as if her given name is being ignored by everyone, even herself. Kidman is the actual puppet of Mobius, and not Sebastian or Joseph and the others, because the latter were trapped without them knowing, while Kidman became consciously a part of Mobius, falsely believing that she was a valuable asset when, in fact, she was expendable, a harsh truth that is revealed to her by Ruvik himself. In that sense, Kidman is a neutral character that acts like some sort of wild card: although her essential role is crucial, she never exposes too much, keeping herself half-hidden in the dark, so as to be able to adapt her strategy to any given situation.

Joseph, on the other hand, Sebastian's partner and friend, is the symbol of friendship and loyalty on one level, but on another he also expresses the well-hidden dark side that all people have and are too afraid to let it show, but will easily succumb to it when found in a vulnerable state. Joseph, who always appears to be collected, conservative and down-to-earth, discovers an evil and twisted side within him that is full of complex desires and dark thoughts. What unsettles him is the realisation that he is starting to like this dark side and part of himself desires to turn.

Leslie, the albino kid with a mental disorder, is chased by Ruvik who wants to use him as a host in order to get out of STEM. In the end of the game, Sebastian catches a glimpse of Leslie walking out of the hospital and it is as if he is a different person. It is clearly implied at this point that Ruvik finally achieved his goal and managed to be reborn in Leslie's body. The symbolism associated with Leslie is very clear, as he is the ignorant carrier of the evil in the world.

Tatiana, the nurse who is in charge of the safe clinic where Sebastian can resort so as to upgrade skills and open lockers containing useful items and supplies, may not be a part of the main plot but still her role is vital in the game. She is a good-looking young woman with a stern face that shows no emotion and talks to Sebastian with the same tone always, no matter what she says. She seems to be unaffected by what happens around her and she is unable or unwilling to give Sebastian any info about the situation. As it is revealed by the end of the game, Tatiana is actually part of Mobius. She can be seen walking past Kidman and she is the one to whom Juli says to leave Sebastian, faking his death so as to help him escape.

Having played *The Evil Within 2* and knowing about how 'Sebastian's Room' was a place created by Mobius using Sebastian's memories, we can deduce that the safe clinic in *The Evil Within* was a place also formed by Mobius in some way. Tatiana was a nurse working at Beacon, who one day disappeared - probably, like Juli and others, willingly joining Mobius. Being a member of Mobius and obviously among the ones in charge of the STEM room, she was several times present in there.

It is more than likely that Sebastian saw her in a possible waking interval that lasted for fractions of seconds, and in his STEM reality she took the role of a nurse as Sebastian's last memories before entering STEM were in the hospital. Throughout the game, Tatiana acts as a counselor for Sebastian and many times she speaks like his conscience, although her words are generally cryptic and, often, confusing. Tatiana mostly represents Sebastian's thoughts that are messed up in the state he is in and are trying to take shape, in an attempt to explain the nightmare in which he is trapped and from where there seems to be no way out.

## Symbols of a destroyed childhood

Ruvik was a child prodigy with an eccentric and lonely personality. He spent his days doing experiments that were particularly gross - in a vision, Sebastian sees him slicing the cut head of a pig. Nonetheless, he was a scientific genius who had his own way of thinking and was, inevitably, marginalized by his family. The only person who understood him and cared for him was his older sister, Laura. Ruvik adored his sister and was very attached to her, she was the world to him.

Neither Ruvik nor Laura were happy kids. They were living isolated in their family estate, and they only had each other. Ruvik, in particular, never experienced a normal childhood, something that becomes even more stressed by the total lack of things like toys or family souvenirs, for example, in the rooms of the Victoriano mansion. The house looks more like a vintage museum, and several of the paintings that decorate its walls have negative and depressing imagery.

On the contrary, the items that symbolize Ruvik and Laura's ruined childhood can be seen scattered in several random places like the city streets or the hospital. Since it is through Ruvik's mind that the plot progresses, it is expected that he has sort of scattered fragments of his memories everywhere around.

The first item that we come across that is related to this symbolism is a vintage doll that is sitting naked on a table in the basement of Beacon, in *Inner Recesses*. Sebastian comes across it as he is making his way through the dark and hostile halls of the hospital.

Such dolls can be seen thrown around in the sewers in a couple more places and the feeling that you get by looking at them is rather disturbing. Pretty much like Alfred Ashford's creepy dolls in *Resident Evil: Code Veronica*, these dolls here accentuate Ruvik's deranged mind and act as a creepy reminder of his presence.

Later on in *The Craftsman's Tools*, Sebastian enters a bizarre dark room that looks like it came straight out of a nightmarish amusement park. When Sebastian accidentally activates a trap mechanism, the whole place becomes operational and it is revealed that it is in fact a lethal carousel that consists of a rotating blade and hanging cages most of which are empty but in one or two there are mannequins inside. As the blade and cages turn, a beautiful but haunting circus music is heard in the background, creating a shocking contrast between possible childhood memories associated with circuses and amusement parks, and the evil and twisted world where Sebastian is trapped.

So in Ruvik's mind, all the happy things that are associated with childhood take a negative and evil shape and many times are used as murderous means. Further down, however, in *Reunion*, when Sebastian finds himself in the ruined city, he sees a normal-looking carousel among the debris. But if you think that this image is soothing, you are pretty much mistaken. The carousel looks nice and is in good shape, complete with its horses and all, but it is operational and this is what actually makes it creepy. The horses are rotating and the same circus music can be heard coming from it, as if the carousel is haunted - which it most probably is.



At the end of Reunion, Sebastian catches up with Juli and Leslie at a playground. This place seems to come out of a happy dream, with its bright colours and bubbles floating in the air. However the several parts of the equipment are in motion, as if someone is actually using them, which automatically creates the chilling feeling that the playground is haunted.

A place directly connected to children, the playground symbolizes not only Ruvik's destroyed childhood but also Leslie's and Juli's. When arriving there, Leslie seems momentarily happy, as if he found something familiar; however it will be seconds before Ruvik arrives to look for him. As for Juli, we know from her story that her childhood was not simply destroyed; she actually never had a proper childhood. The playground is more like an illusion, an evil trap aiming at hitting a nerve and sentimentally weakening the people involved in the scene.

In the *Executioner* episode, we come across several graffiti on the walls of the Victoriano manor and the cells of Ruvik's secret labs, that depict morbid scenes related to the protagonists and Ruvik's victims, that look like they are drawn by a child, but they are most probably made by someone mocking a child's drawing style. These graffiti are rather strong symbols of a corrupted childhood since their themes are in striking contrast with their style.

## Alice In Wonderland

The emblematic novel by Lewis Carroll is, inevitably, one of the most popular sources of inspiration in all expressions of culture that followed. And rightly so, as it is one of the most original pieces of work of modern literature. There are several symbols in *The Evil Within* that allude to Alice, the most prominent being the mirrors, through which Sebastian can teleport from the safe clinic to Krimson City and vice versa.

The mirror, both as an element of the plot and as a symbol, appears in both *The Evil Within* and *The Evil Within 2* and its role is, in both, pretty similar. In the first game, however, there is yet one more strong symbol that reflects *Alice in Wonderland*: just like Alice followed the White Rabbit in Wonderland, Sebastian follows Leslie in the deepest realms of Ruvik's mind. In connection to the White Rabbit, Leslie is the 'white kid': dressed in white, with white hair since he is an albino, and with skin white as snow.

Leslie appears several times in Sebastian's path, but in *An Evil Within* his role becomes much stronger: he literally guides Sebastian through the final stages of Ruvik's madness. At that point, he is partially possessed by Ruvik as he seems to randomly switch from his standard fast and haunched walking to a normal one, and during those intervals his senseless muttering is replaced by regular talking.

## Duality symbols and the Alter Ego

Everything in the story of *The Evil Within* works with mirrors - both literal and metaphorical - and opposites. There are the mirrors through which Sebastian moves between places, and there is also the mirrored and, essentially reversed and distorted - version of reality. Almost all the characters involved exist in two versions: their real one, which is in a sleeping state, and the virtual one that is wandering inside STEM. Both Sebastian and Juli, at some point while in STEM, have the chance to see their sleeping versions in the tubs. Ruvik appears in two actual states as well: one is his ghost form which floats around, and the other is his brain that is serving as the Core of STEM.

Very early in the game, specifically at the start of *Remnants*, Sebastian is experiencing a weird vision or living nightmare during which he is being carried through a hospital corridor, tied on a bed, by a doctor and a nurse. Both these people appear nowhere else in the story and there is

something very strange about them: the nurse's face is motionless, as if she is going through a trance; and the doctor has an uncanny facial similarity with William Butler Yeats.

What is even more interesting is that Yeats, in his book *Ideas of Good and Evil*, mentions the following in relation to Magic:

"I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are: 1. That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy. 2. That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself. 3. That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols. I often think I would put this belief in magic from me if I could, for I have come to see or to imagine, in men and women, in houses, in handicrafts, in nearly all sights and sounds, a certain evil, a certain ugliness, that comes from the slow perishing through the centuries of a quality of mind that made this belief and its evidences common over the world."

Yeats, poet, playwright and essayist, had shown a great interest for the occult and even participated in events centered around the summoning of spirits. All that he describes in the above lines seems to connect strongly with several elements of *The Evil Within*, in relation to the function of the minds and the idea of evil.

At the end of the scene, the doctor and the nurse leave and seconds later a hideous creature appears from the bottom of Sebastian's bed, crawls over him and attempts to attack him. The scene ends abruptly, but we have the chance to see that the creature is the Alter Ego, one of Ruvik's monstrosities; it is tall and lean, with huge claws instead of fingernails and two heads - one being relatively normal and another looking like a bundle of skin and blood. This creature is the result of connecting to STEM a person with personality disorder. The several personalities that this person has, manifest themselves via the two heads sticking out of the same body. Apart from its direct symbolism, this creature also symbolizes the identity crisis that several of the characters experience in the story: Kidman is a double agent, Josphe struggles to suppress his evil side, Laura was a good-hearted girl but became a vicious killer after death.

Sebastian manages to maintain his mind in a relatively sane and clear state, although this experience took its toll on him, as we can see in *The Evil Within 2*, where his nightmares not only had not gone away, but they are back with a vengeance in the form of yet another creature with strong symbolism, the frightening Anima.

Anima has the form of a creepily tall woman who is able to float in the air, move very fast and pass through walls. She is usually heard singing a distorted version of *Claire de Lune* by Claude Debussy - the piece that Ruvik is playing on the piano in one of Sebastian's visions, which is also the theme that is heard when he is near a teleporting mirror. Anima is clad in torn robes, like Ruvik; and she has long black hair and several arms, just like the monster version of Laura. Every time she appears, the environment turns blue and/or is distorted, like what happens whenever Ruvik shows up. Her attacks will kill Sebastian instantly, like Ruvik's and Laura's.

The Anima is a sum-up of Sebastian's haunting memories from Beacon, which in turn were associated with Ruvik, therefore Ruvik is again responsible for a good deal of Sebastian's mental and emotional tortures in Union. The fact that Ruvik is still there somehow implies that he still manages to dominate part of Sebastian's mind, something that seems to get to an end when

Sebastian, after one final encounter with the Anima, discovers that his old self is still trapped in STEM and shoots him. This reflects a scene from the first game where Sebastian, while being connected to STEM, visions his virtual self aiming and shooting his real sleeping self. This vision symbolizes Sebastian's desperate attempts to escape from the situation where he is trapped, but also serves as a conveyor of a message that Mobius tries to impose on him and which implies that he too has an evil and ruthless side, and that if they want, they can make him act as it serves them best. In other words, Mobius attempts to create a false alter ego of Sebastian so as to manipulate him.

Later on in *Losing Grip On Ourselves*, Sebastian finds himself again in the same hospital room of Remnants, with Dr 'Yeats' and the ghostly nurse above him. As the doctor approaches Sebastian to shoot him with an injection, his figure briefly switches to Kidman's a couple of times. Since we know that Kidman was indeed hovering over Sebastian while he was connected to STEM, it becomes clear that in this scene, it is actually Kidman who comes to inject Sebastian - the environment around momentarily changes to the STEM room when Kidman 'replaces' the doctor - and, in Sebastian's vision, she changes form.

So why Sebastian's mind decides to envision Kidman as a man? This is partially related to what I mentioned earlier in *Male and Female Symbols*. It is as if Kidman has no gender, and, to an extent, no personality. Being manipulated by Mobius, she has lost herself and her attitude is marginally automated. It may also be a subconscious connotation that the sedated Sebastian makes from her surname's ending: he briefly manages to see her, he recognizes her as Kidman, but he is too drugged to be able to think clearly and his mind creates in front of him the figure of a man (Kid-Man). It also implies his realization that he doesn't really know her at all.

### The masked enemies

Among the Haunted that Sebastian encounters, there are a few whose face is covered with a horrifying smiling mask. These enemies, although being regular Haunted, are a bit stronger than the others and they usually carry guns, molotov bombs or knives. They are extremely creepy and frightening to look at, and they seem to be one more extravagant result of Ruvik's doings aiming at terrorizing Sebastian.

The mask as a symbol stands for everything that is concealed, ambiguous or hypocritical, therefore the masked men seem to be derived out of Ruvik's subconscious, expressing all that is still hidden or deeply buried. The Guardian from *The Evil Within 2*, the monster with the frozen smile and the chilling laughter, vaguely alludes to them.

Interestingly enough, the mask brings us back to W.B. Yeats, through whom it is linked with the Alter Ego. Early in his career, the Irish poet had shown interest in the modern psychological studies of the time about the subconscious and was fascinated with the concept of a divided self or a self which is covered by a mask. According to Yeats, the mask, which symbolizes the alter-ego or a protective shield, mainly acts as a metaphor for an internal struggle. In that sense, the masked enemy is a more vague and general depiction of the Alter Ego, which, in turn, subconsciously uses its dual identity as a shield so as to be able to handle its different personalities. So we could say that the masked men are a lighter variation of the Alter Ego enemies.

### Mannequins

Mannequins appear in several places in *The Evil Within*. Sebastian sees quite a few in the Victoriano estate, and close to the end of this stage he reaches a nightmarish room full of cages and giant mannequin heads. While being chased by yet one more of Ruvik's monsters, he has to dash through a corridor where more mannequin heads are threatening to crush him. The mannequin heads, clearly

associated with the mind, symbolize the power of Ruvik's brain who was total control over everything and everyone, including their private thoughts and their own memories.

Later in *Reunion*, Sebastian enters a back yard full of mannequins and mannequin body parts. Mannequins symbolize illusions and everything that is false and fake. Moreover, as they cannot move and have no will of their own, they represent a static state, where people are unable to move on or decide for themselves. The mannequins are hinting at the heroes that what they are going through is a deception, something that is not real, something that is essentially staged and which they have no power to control.

## The Subway

A standard symbol of the subconscious, the subway comes into play close to the end of the game. As Sebastian gets closer and closer to Ruvik, he infiltrates the depths of his paranoia and enters his subconscious which takes the form of a destroyed and spooky subway. Abandoned platforms, ghost trains, chilling ambient sounds, lethal and vicious monsters, create an atmosphere that pretty much sums up Ruvik's corrupted mind.

The subconscious plays a very important role in the story of *The Evil Within*. As the characters are connected to STEM and are abruptly thrown in bizarre sceneries made of Ruvik's 'jumbled up memories', as Joseph comments, their own mind travels back and forth and their own subconscious mixes their memories with Ruvik's. The subway acts both as a metaphorical means of transportation through this nightmarish voyage and as the tangible depiction of a place that is basically mental.

## The Sunflower Symbolism

The sunflower is a dominant and recurring symbol in *The Evil Within*, as it is associated with Ruvik and is part of his memories. Sunflowers can be seen in several spots, first as hints and then connected directly to Ruvik. As a symbol, the sunflower represents power, adoration, lasting happiness. It also symbolizes the strong bond between two people. For Ruvik, it is also a constant reminder of the day when he and Laura were heavily injured in a fire caused by the local farmers, who burned the sunflower field of his family, subsequently leading to Laura's death and his own disfigurement.

Early in the story, Sebastian finds a room which shows a stage from Ruvik's life. The wall is covered with calculations and scientific designs as part of his research, and on one corner there is a sketch of a sunflower.

An interesting fact about the sunflowers is that Alan Turing started a research in 1954, attempting to prove that the spirals on the sunflowers correspond to the Fibonacci sequence. He died before being able to complete his study, and although independent experiments carried out afterwards showed that his theory could not be proven in its entirety, still all this shows that the sunflowers were not randomly chosen to be associated with such a complicated character like Ruvik, as they are rather complex and peculiar flowers; not to mention that Turing, just like Ruvik, was a scientific genius.

Ruvik uses the sunflowers as some sort of guiding lights that gradually lead Sebastian to the revelation of his life's tragedy. While Sebastian is in the safe haven of the clinic in *The Cruellest Intentions*, the main room changes and several paintings appear on its walls. These paintings are part of the art collection in the Victoriano manor, but what dominates is the depiction of three giant sunflowers on one wall.

At this point, the clinic is transformed into Ruvik's realm. The portrait of his family is high up on another wall, but his own face is torn out and cockroaches are coming out of the hole. Sebastian cannot use the mirrors to teleport and he starts walking along the corridor of the patient ward. The environment turns black and white as the corridor turns into a countryside path. At the end of the path, there is a giant sunflower. As Sebastian approaches it, Ruvik appears through it, gets close to Sebastian and transfers him in the Victoriano estate.

As Sebastian explores the house and goes through a series of trials, he comes across several depictions of sunflowers, either in paintings or actual flowers thrown on the floor. At the conclusion of the chapter, Sebastian finds himself in the sunflower field. The compelling imagery of this part gives both the impression of something protected - the field is revealed behind a double gate, after a long corridor and several trapped rooms - as well as of something threatening and imminent. The yellow colour of the sunflower petals even paints the sky yellow and it is as if this whole scene is taking place inside a sunflower.

The sunflower as a powerful and constant symbol gradually identifies itself with Ruvik, and vice versa. The peak of its symbolism is reached in the sunflower field and, subsequently, inside the barn. When Sebastian enters the barn, there is no way back out to the field. He gets trapped inside Ruvik's memories - just like Ruvik and Laura were trapped in the barn when the farmers set the field on fire - and is forced to witness a series of visions that revive Laura's tragic fate.

## Blood and The Colour Red

With the exception of the aforementioned stage in *The Cruellest Intentions*, the rest of *The Evil Within* is coloured in faded tones, as if desaturated a bit, with an overall vintage-looking effect. Brighter colours, wherever they appear, look almost striking, like the yellow of sunflowers I wrote about in the previous section. Another colour that seems to appear regularly is red.

To begin with, the name of the fictional place where the events of the story take place is Krimson City. Krimson reads like crimson, which is the deepest red, and its reference to blood, which is so dominant in the game, is quite obvious.

Blood is Ruvik's most frequent way of exposing things and conveying messages. From his childhood, when he slaughtered animals and experimented on their dead limbs, to his youth when he used patients from the Beacon Mental Hospital for his research and eventually killed them, to his after-death activity when he was able to use his supernatural powers to eliminate people.

Blood is one of the most essential elements of the game. It mainly symbolizes death, disaster, revenge and also the struggle for survival. Very close to the start, Sebastian is chased by the Sadist and as he runs away, he falls in a round tank which is full of blood, with corpses and body parts floating around. Close to the end of *The Patient*, and while being with Leslie and Dr Martinez, Sebastian is distracted by Ruvik's appearance and as he attempts to follow him, he loses his companions and ends up in a pool of blood from where Ruvik summons about a dozen Haunted. Soon after, in *Inner Recesses*, Sebastian enters a bizarre hall with three small square holes on each one of three of its walls. Looking through each of these holes, he witnesses three stages of Ruvik's life in three separate rooms. After looking from a hole, he has to enter the respective room and press a button. Every time he does this, a trap is activated, releasing a blood line in the main hall outside. When all three buttons are pressed and all three blood lines are set, they all unite and flow towards the fourth wall, which is immediately covered with blood as bloody handprints appear on it and chilling screams are heard all the while. Suddenly, the blood disappears, and is replaced by a door. The corridor beyond it leads to the room where Sebastian finds Joseph, whom he considered dead until then.



Ruvik likes to appear and disappear through floating blood cells, as we see near the end of *Claws of The Horde*, where the Sadist, after being killed by Sebastian, dissolves into blood cells which form a floating path that leads to Ruvik. Much later, in *The Cruellest Intentions*, while Sebastian is exploring the Victoriano estate, more floating blood cells lead him towards a series of rooms where he sees young Ruvik again doing his experiments. In the conclusion of these scenes, the blood cells unite with ghost Ruvik and form the Blood Man, to whom I will refer further down.

Blood and death are directly connected with Ruvik, and he uses both to frighten and manipulate his victims. All of them are in a state where they cannot understand if they are alive and dreaming or they died and are floating in a hellish world.

Apart from its direct connection to blood, red symbolizes many positive things like passion, love, lust, sexuality, desire, physical energy, confidence, courage. It is also associated with the most primitive means of survival and self-preservation. However, it comes loaded with some negative things as well, like anger, violence, revenge. In Japanese culture (remember: the creator of the game is Japanese), it is associated with several deities and it is perceived as a means, as a charm., that keeps away evil forces, sickness, demons, bad luck.

The most memorable tangible appearance of the colour red is on Laura's dress. Tatiana has a red jacket on, while both Sebastian and Joseph wear red ties. Young Ruvik, as he appears in the family portrait in the Victoriano estate, is also wearing a red tie. In Juli's version of the events, the red colour also appears on a few notable occasions.

Ruvik is the one who caused all this in the first place. Living in the shadow of his imposing and stern father, with a mother who loved her children but was too weak to stand up to her husband, he grew up with a progressive insecurity, while being strongly attached to Laura. His evil genius led him to kill his parents after Laura's death and carry out his extreme experiments, dragging everybody in his twisted mind. Red for him is mostly associated with his anger and murderous intent towards his potential victims.

One of his manifestations is The Blood Man, the weird and ominous creature made of blood cells that I mentioned previously, which appears in the estate and chases Sebastian, leading him to the sunflower field. The Blood Man, who appears uniquely in *The Cruellest Intentions*, is directly associated with Ruvik's tragic memory of the arson that was the start of his downfall. He shows up again in the chapter's conclusion in the barn, where he releases blood cells that form Haunted who attack Sebastian. The reason why, in this part, Ruvik decides to not fight with Sebastian directly has to do with his own sentimental attachment with the place. The barn is where he essentially lost his sister, but also where, moments before the arson, he was playing joyfully with her. His most cherished memory and his most tragic one are perpetually linked and he clings on to both in an attempt to keep Laura's memory alive forever. Which is blatant tragic irony, of course, as he is also dead himself.

Tatiana is Sebastian's connection with the outside world, although he doesn't know it. She acts like a guide, an objective observator, and a bit like the chorus of the classical greek tragedies: she comments on the hero's decisions and trials, makes cryptic predictions and gives hints without getting involved any further. For her, red signifies caution and it also represents her status as it is part of her uniform.

Laura is the reason behind everything in the story. It was because she died that Ruvik started losing his mind, and it was because he wanted to find a way to be reunited with her that he came up with the insane research and the subsequent experiments on which later STEM was based. In that sense,

Laura is, if not the strongest character of the game, at least as strong as Sebastian is; and it is not random that, as a boss in her monster form, she is incredibly hard to defeat. For Laura, red has a dual symbolism: it represents the love for her brother and her sacrifice that saved him. but it also stands for the anger and thirst for revenge that characterizes her ghostly identity.

In *The Assignment* and *The Consequence* episodes, that narrate Juli Kidman's nightmarish journey in STEM, there are three appearances of the red colour that stand out. The first is in fact a dual one, on two things that always appear in Juli's path together: a red leather couch and a black cat with a red ribbon round its neck.

Every time Juli reaches such a couch with a cat, the player can save the game, but speaking in terms of the game's universe, Juli finds a safe spot to rest for a few seconds and put herself together. The cat, linked to her childhood memories, gives her a temporary joy, giving her a brief feeling of warmth and protection. Red in this case is, for Juli, a sign of life and familiarity in the ghost-like hostile place that she is exploring.

The second appearance of the red colour in Juli's story is on the Shade, the terrifying monster that chases her relentlessly, an unnaturally tall creature with slender long legs and red high-heeled shoes. The Shade, that acts both as a Nemesis and a guide for Juli, looks like a monstrous depiction of the female figure. Juli, who never had a normal childhood, is like a child trapped in a woman's body. Even her surname partly hints to that. Her only feminine feature is her own high heels, which however are more like weapons and less like actual accessories - she even defends herself at some point with them, hitting the Haunted Connelly on the chin. The Shade, despite her hideous appearance, is wearing stylish red shoes, at the same time walking clumsily on them, as if mocking Juli for being psychologically unprepared to be a woman. The red colour here symbolizes primarily Juli's numbed femininity, and on a sublevel all those elements of her personality that she was forced to keep suppressed all her life, first in her family environment and then in Mobius.

The third appearance of the colour red in Juli's episodes is on her evil clones, an illusion created by the Administrator to attack Juli, attempting to kill her. Those clones look like damaged versions of Juli and they are wearing a red shirt. The red colour in this case represents an evil side that, however, is artificial; moreover, combined with the mechanical movement of the clones, it symbolizes Juli's inner fears and the fact that she is always faking her real identity and, inevitably, her real feelings.

Joseph is among the few of Ruvik's victims who are able to fully realize their condition, and even control it. He has many secrets and hidden desires and from the moment that he becomes a Haunted for the first time, he kind of develops an evil twin who battles with his normal, good self so as to dominate him completely. For him, the red colour symbolizes his hidden passions and the violence that he expresses when he turns.

Sebastian is the only one who doesn't have evil within him. Despite his confusion and agony, he manages to keep both his mind and soul clean of the evil that Ruvik is trying to inject in him - although Ruvik is sure that he will be able to manipulate him completely and in one single instance he seemingly manages to possess him. All the others around him are affected one way or the other; even Leslie, who is an ignorant and innocent boy, is like a blank canvas, ready to receive, absorb and eventually spread anything evil - just like Lily, in *The Evil Within 2*. Juli may not be categorized as voluntarily or involuntarily evil like the others, but her status as a double agent inevitably places her on the side of the bad guys, albeit she was a victim as well and later, in *The Evil Within 2*, she atoned for everything. Joseph becomes a Haunted and it is something that he enjoys, while Dr Jimenez stole Ruvik's research and then had him killed.

Both Joseph and Sebastian having a red tie like young Ruvik could hint at the latter's twisted attempts to find and live through a strong and healthy male body - in contrast with Leslie, who is a compatible host and whom he will eventually have to use, whose body is sick and mind is unstable. It is as if he has both Sebastian and Joseph on a noose, and he cannot decide whom he will sacrifice. The fact that Joseph is too weak and tends to succumb to his evil side does not satisfy Ruvik, though. His sadistic instinct leads him to turn to Sebastian, eagerly wanting to torture him by forcing him to evil actions, then watching him in delight as he suffers while struggling to fight it.

Nonetheless, Sebastian is the only one with a pure heart. For him, the red colour symbolizes passion, sexuality, physical strength and survival skills. He is a thinker, an investigator in the wider sense. His mind is constantly active, even when he is in a sedated state. He questions things, and his instinctive objections to what is imposed on him are that essentially save him.

20 February 2018

## MYTHOLOGICAL SYMBOLS IN *RESIDENT EVIL 4*



There are three instances where mythological symbols become prominent in the *Resident Evil 4* story, something that is, by default, an extremely interesting element that is worth exploring; moreso since, not randomly, I would guess, those symbols are borrowed from three different mythologies around the world. While they can be all viewed simply as aesthetic additions and, in the two of the three cases as the puzzles that they essentially are, their literary and factual interpretation is equally important, in relation to the game's characters and their (back)stories.

The most obvious symbol is the Chimera mural in Salazar's castle. Coming from the ancient Greek mythology, the Chimera was a monstrous-looking, fire-breathing lion with a goat head emerging from its back and a tail with a serpent's head at its end, which was killed by Bellerophon, a hero and slayer of monsters.

The mural in *Resident Evil 4* appears in chapter 3-1, when Leon enters the main section of the castle with Ashley. The wall that it decorates drops down, blocking the passage leading forward, and upon seeing the impressive relief, Leon mentions that it is 'a beautiful decoration'. After taking a few seconds to admire our fearless hero for being an art-loving and cultivated zombie killer, we realize that what we actually see is half the mural: Bellerophon is there, but the three pieces of which the Chimera is comprised, are missing; so we need to find the three respective ornaments: the Lion, the Goat and the Serpent.

All those three aforementioned animals carry some major and essential symbolisms on their own. The Lion, referring to the beautiful feline that is considered the King of the Jungle, represents grandeur, bravery, beauty and leadership. Considering that Leon's name also means 'lion', it becomes rather obvious that, from an allegorical / metaphorical point of view, the Lion symbol is related to him. He too, like the king of the jungle, is beautiful and brave; he is also a charismatic leader whom all the others respect.

Leon is a particularly dominant character throughout the whole *Resident Evil* series. Having appeared in six games as a main character (I also count *Operation Raccoon City* and the upcoming *Resident Evil 2* remake among those) and all three CGI movies as a protagonist, he has clearly established his status as one of the most popular heroes not only among the fans of the saga, but also among the game's developers. The combination of high intelligence, excellent survival skills, good heart and great looks, quickly turned him into a hero that could be loved as easily as breathing the air. Leon's charisma is something that could never pass unnoticed, inevitably being also admired by his enemies.

The Goat, which generally and commonly symbolizes vitality and energy, is nonetheless associated with the dark powers of evil in several myths, folklore and religions. From that specific aspect, in its

secondary but no less important allegorical depiction, the Goat is related to all the evil that dominates in the story of *Resident Evil 4*: Lord Saddler, Salazar, Bitores Mendez and last but not least Wesker, are the powers of evil that destroy, kill and spread infections wherever they go.

Set in the middle of the Chimera, the Goat has a very prominent role in the symbol, just like the villains of the story affect everybody with their actions and decisions. Hidden somewhere in the backstage, Wesker pulls the strings, attempting to turn the outcome of the events to his own benefit. Saddler, the typical egomaniac psychopath with the Messiah syndrom, has no moral barriers and is the definition of Evil in full. Bitores Mendez is his second-in-command, but no less lethal and determined to exterminate whomever he believes to be a threat. As for Salazar, he is more like a pawn in Saddler's game, but his inflated ego - in contrast with his diminutive stature - cannot let him see things for what they are, and he is doomed to follow the path of Evil for the rest of his short and miserable life.

The Serpent may allude to Evil on several levels, with the most prominent being its connection to the Devil and the original sin, but in the case of the *Resident Evil 4* story it acts as a much more specific and direct symbol, being obviously related to the game's most memorable villain, Jack Krauser. From his notable mischievous gaze, which looks exactly like a snake's, to his trademark combat knife that has a serpent carved at the bottom part of its blade, Krauser seems to be no less than the human manifestation of what is, apparently, his spirit animal.

Jack's connection with snakes goes even further, however. If we trace his story back to his jungle adventure with Leon in *The Darkside Chronicles*, we will recall how during the first meeting with his future partner he immediately sensed the presence of a snake that was about to attack Leon, and instantly stabbed it on the head. Later on, one of the first things that he noticed when the zombified soldiers attacked them at the village, was the snake tattoo that they had on them. Jack had always been fascinated by snakes, feeling at the same time attracted and compelled by them. By embracing them as his symbol / spirit animal, he was able to tame them and subsequently gain several of their traits and qualities. Thus he appears as a cunning, villainous and sly, but at the same time extremely intelligent and highly perceptive man who has a very strong instinct and relies heavily on it.

Leon as part of the Chimera symbol is an inseparable part of the story, leading to its conclusion which is the elimination of all the evil that the Goat and the Serpent represent from the hand of Bellerophon who, in turn, as a monster killer, is another manifestation of Leon, the zombie killer. This means that Leon is represented by two symbols here (Bellerophon and the Lion), which brings us back to the duality of Leon's character as it is illustrated in the symbolism of the Golden Lynx puzzle.

Much later, in Chapter 5-3, we come across another mythological symbol which may pass unnoticed as it is not part of any puzzle and it is located on a spot that can be easily missed. Above the huge double doors that separate the rest of the island from the ruins, there is a depiction of Melusine, the two-tailed mermaid of the Celtic folklore.

Melusine is a spirit of the water and is usually depicted with a dual tail, either of a fish or of a snake. According to her legend, she was able to change forms, and thus could also appear with the normal body of a woman. The pattern of transformation is very familiar to Jack Krauser's story, as we see him change forms during Leon's final fight with him, which takes place just beyond that specific gate. Melusine as a symbol of Krauser's imminent shapeshifting acts as a minor allegory that kind of brings together his two appearances - the one that belongs to the Earth element (the Snake) and the one that belongs to the Air element (his final mutation which will grant him the wing-like arm).

In the same chapter, we come across the final important mythological symbol of the story. The Holy Beast that can be seen as a relief at the end of Chapter 5-3 is a variation of a triptych of the Incan mythology with the original sacred animals being the Puma, the Snake and the Condor. In the *Resident Evil 4* story, we have a mural that depicts a Panther, a Serpent and an Eagle. Just like the Chimera mural in the castle, this here too is missing its three pieces, which in this case are three insignias with the three animals carved on them. Two of them, the Panther and the Eagle, are found laying on the ground in different parts of the ruins, and the last one, the Serpent, can be obtained only after Leon kills Krauser, as he is the one who holds it.

The Snake here carries a more inclusive role than in its Chimera depiction. Considering that it is an animal that has the ability to change its skin, it represents transformation and rebirth. The Panther as a spirit animal symbolizes courage and power, but also aggression and fierceness. The Eagle symbolizes immortality and connection to the divine, as it can fly higher than any other bird.

The three animals depicted in the relief are interconnected, and the two of them are symbols of the same person, that is Krauser. Both the Serpent and the Eagle relate to him - the Serpent as a constant allegory of his inner self, which probably also explains why he decided to keep that specific piece with him, and the Eagle as the manifestation of his final mutation in which he appeared with a graceful but extremely lethal arm with blades that look like wings (as if foreshadowing this, the Eagle insignia is found on the ground, just below the pedestal where Jack's aforementioned mutation takes place). Because of the Eagle's allegory of immortality, it also hints at Krauser's desire to possess superhuman power, as well as at the possibility that he might not have really died in the end.

The Panther, on the other hand, represents mainly Leon, but also Krauser on a sublevel: as a powerful and brave feline, it is Leon's symbol; but as an aggressive protector, it is more like Krauser. Somewhere deep inside him, Krauser had several things in common with Leon - he even mentions in *The Darkside Chronicles* that Leon and himself are two sides of the same coin - but at some point he decided to bury them and let the darkness inside him prevail. In the mural, the Panther subdues the Snake from which an Eagle rises. In other words, Leon defeated Krauser as well as his mutated form, and while Krauser was apparently exterminated, that original part of him that was the good soldier whom Leon met in the jungle, presumably still exists in Leon's memories, given the comment that he makes concerning his opponent at the end of the fight. Which, in turn, signifies that, under that light, the two characters are united in their common symbol of the Panther.

1 October 2018



## BIOSHOCK: INFINITE AS A RETRO-FUTURISTIC FAIRY TALE



The world of *Bioshock: Infinite* is a magic one. A universe full of color and fancy with a vibrant steampunk atmosphere, and contemporary tunes playing on gramophones in retro style. Its characters defy both time and space: they can fly in the air thanks to improvised devices and they can go back in time by using tears. Nothing is ordinary in Columbia and Emporia, the colorful floating cities that are bursting with life and flowers and look like amusement parks coming straight out of a fairy tale.

When the protagonist of the game, Booker DeWitt, wakes up in a boat on a rainy night, accompanied by two strange people who lead him to a mysterious lighthouse, little does he suspect of what will come next. The lighthouse, a major symbol used extensively in video games, plays a crucial role here too, transporting Booker to Columbia where he begins a dramatic quest, looking for answers concerning his overwhelming sense of guilt. As it is gradually revealed, he had lived more than one lives in several realities. In one life he was a soldier who took part in a massacre, in another he was a private detective, in a third one he was the leader of a revolutionary movement, in a fourth one he was a bloodsucking governor who longed for eternal life.

Similarly Elizabeth, his co-protagonist, has gone through several different statuses during her time travels. Same goes for Rosalind Lutece, the enlightened scientist who developed the quantum technology responsible for the existence of floating cities and, subsequently, the possibility of traveling back and forth in time through the tears that she was able to create.

Combining elements of past, present and imaginary future times, historical events, fantasy and tragedy, *Bioshock: Infinite* is a retro-futuristic fairy tale that uses elements of the past to describe a society of the future. Sometimes, it can also be the opposite. No less than a gloomy prophecy, its depiction of an authoritarian society where the high class is thriving while the vast majority of its population is suffering, sounds and seems particularly realistic in its symbolism. But this is exactly what fairy tales always do: they make extremely insightful and diachronic statements through allegories that can be universally applied. *Bioshock: Infinite* follows the structure of a traditional fairy tale, incorporating all of its standard elements that have to do with the plot, the characters and the complementary attributes.

Fairy tales play with opposites, the most prominent couple of contrasting sides being good and evil. *Bioshock: Infinite* has its good characters, Booker and Elizabeth, who, in different stages, have to go against several evil forces, represented by Zachary Comstock, Jeremiah Fink and Cornelius Slate. The battle of good versus evil, however, goes even deeper in the game, as in Booker's case both opposites exist in the same person: he is a good man in his current state as Booker DeWitt, albeit with a past he is not so proud of as a soldier, while he was an evil man as Zachary Comstock

in a different reality. The biggest tragedy in Booker's life is that his good side is constantly fighting against his evil side; a fight that at some point resulted in him giving up his own daughter.

This also ties with two more recurring themes in fairy tales, that of the exploration of human weakness and that of the triumph of human strength. Despite its dramatic ending, *Bioshock: Infinite* does note the strength of its protagonists, which is showcased in different ways. Booker sacrifices himself so that his other, evil self will not be able to harm his daughter, and Elizabeth finds the necessary inner strength to kill him so as to save her life. They both manage to overcome their weaknesses and turn their fate around. Nothing is definitive in the *Bioshock* universe, however - and both of them are doomed to be born again and again in different realities that always make them come face to face with each other.

In their turn, Comstock and Fink, as well as Elizabeth and Lady Comstock, belong to a society of privilege and wealth, while Booker, just like the revolutionary Daisy Fitzroy, represents the oppressed working class. Poverty and wealth are themes that are extremely popular in fairy tales, and they are most of the times in opposing sides. In *Bioshock: Infinite*, this fight is not highlighted so much as a financial inequality but more like a denunciation of the manners that the higher classes go by that totally diminish and out-power the large masses of underprivileged citizens.

The lead characters in fairy tales have to carry out impossible tasks. Either because they are bound by a curse, or because they are looking for a lost love, or simply because they have to go through a journey of coming-of-age, they are called to carry out trials that seem to test them in more than one ways. In *Bioshock: Infinite*, Booker's quest is such a task; and it leads him to enlightenment, which is literal, as the final revelation starts in an infinite sea with numerous lighthouses, and metaphorical, as he comes to realize the truth about his life.

If there is something that abounds in fairy tales, it is definitely the objects and animals that have the ability to talk. In *Bioshock: Infinite* we find the Songbird, the huge mechanical bird, Elizabeth's guardian and protector, that acts and reacts like an animate creature. In the same spirit, fairy tales like to include in their heroes' quests magic words or phrases that can open doors or solve puzzles. In *Bioshock: Infinite*, there is the secret tune, comprised of four notes that make up the word CAGE, some kind of code to which the Songbird responds.

In fairy tales there are also items that carry a special importance and they act as passes or keys that lead to other places - sometimes also to other dimensions. In *Bioshock: Infinite*, there are literal keys - more specifically lock-picks, that Elizabeth can use to open locked doors so that she and Booker can go to otherwise unreachable areas. Time tears can also be considered passes of a kind, although they are not tangible items in a plain sense.

Word games are also essential in fairy tales. Many times the solution of a puzzle depends exclusively on using the right words in the right place or in the right order. In *Bioshock: Infinite*, the word games that particularly characterize the dialogues between Rosalind and Robert Lutece as well as the cryptic lines that they say to Booker and Elizabeth offer a lot of insight and often act as warnings or hints.

Spells and magic powers also play a major part in fairy tales. Similarly in *Bioshock: Infinite*, we have Rosalind Lutece and Elizabeth who have the power to open time tears. Moreover in one specific chapter Elizabeth performs an action that comes straight out of a folk tale: she uses her time-bending powers to place obstacles in Booker's path so that he is unable to reach her.

Booker, from his part, can boost his abilities and perception by consuming vigors, which allow him to get stronger and more effective and even grant him with powers that are almost superhuman.

Using tricks to go through difficult or cunning trials is a feature that we regularly see in fairy tales. In *Bioshock: Infinite*, Booker often resorts to his wit in order to outsmart his enemies, for example by turning the turrets against them. Elizabeth takes advantage of her ability to open time tears in order to bring in stuff or backup from other realities so as to help Booker carry out tough battles.

Fairy tales feature guardians and monsters - and so does *Bioshock: Infinite*. From a point and on in the story, Booker stands up as a guardian for Elizabeth; a role that gets even more intensified when, after an unexpected twist, it is revealed that he is actually her father. Therefore his role as a protector becomes much more literal and direct. Initially a guardian for a Elizabeth, the Songbird starts pursuing her and Booker from a point and on, but close to the finale Elizabeth manages to tame it and it again assumes its role as her protector. In a sense, Rosalind and Robert Lutece can also be seen as guardians: Booker comes across them very early in the game and they regularly seem to be there for him and Elizabeth to offer a word of advice, even if their role is not always clear.

As for the monsters of the game, they are actually humans with an evil soul. With the exception of the Handymen, who are unnaturally tall and incredibly strong vicious creatures, Lady Comstock's Zealots, who are more like aggressive ghosts that can appear and disappear through swarms of ravens, and the mechanical Patriots, the rest of the enemies are people who chase Booker and Elizabeth relentlessly and never fail to act like monsters. The pitiful but terrifying Lost Boys, the lunatics in the Asylum who all wear masks that depict past presidents of the United States, the soldiers - all of them have a human form but they have very little to none humanity left in them.

Several times in fairy tales, the protagonists meet strangers during their quests; these fellow travelers have tales to narrate, quite often indirectly providing the necessary illumination for the protagonists that helps them take a crucial decision. In *Bioshock: Infinite*, such tales can be heard in the audio recordings that are scattered throughout the game's world. Memories, confessions, testimonies, either directly or indirectly related to Booker and Elizabeth, shed light on secrets, mysteries and their own past lives.

The way that *Bioshock: Infinite* uses the several elements from folk fairy tales in a futuristic plot is ingenious. Playing with the notions of time and space, the game creates a universe where the near past becomes history in a delightful and intriguing style: an old juke box plays "Tainted Love" in retro jazz style, Booker rides an airship of the kind that we would only expect to see in a Georges Méliès film. Given that fairy tales also surpass the limits of time and space and take place in some kind of parallel universe where anything is possible, their kinship with *Bioshock: Infinite* becomes even more direct and both become different stages of the same thing: it is as if *Bioshock: Infinite* is a contemporary fairy tale, the version of a story from the past in an innovative time and space.

12 December 2018

## THE CATCHER IN THE RYE AND LIFE IS STRANGE



J.D. Salinger's masterpiece novel *The Catcher In The Rye* has inspired several themes in Dontnod's brilliant games of the *Life Is Strange* series and their universe. The book is narrated in first person by Holden Caulfield, a 17-year-old boy who is currently in an institution in California. A few days before, he had been expelled from his prestigious college in Pennsylvania due to bad performance and got back to New York where his home was, intending to spend a few days wandering here and there until his return for the Christmas holidays, as he did not want his parents to find out about the expulsion. He talks about himself, his family, his college, his schoolmates, his friends, in a form of consecutive abrupt confessions, while he several times refers to his three siblings - his older brother, D.B. a careless, successful author with whom he intends to live from now on, his younger sister Phoebe, a smart and intuitive girl, and his little brother, Allie, with whom he obviously had a strong connection and who died sometime ago. During his wanderings, he encounters several people, recalls memories and visits bars and hotels, while regularly going back in his mind to things that cannot leave him in peace. The novel is a unique piece of literature, written in a very distinct style, and is one of those stories that require very careful reading in order to become fully clear.

Max, the lead character from *Life Is Strange 1*, shares the same surname with Holden - they are both called Caulfield. Another notable reference is of course the boarding high school where Max is studying, nodding to the similar albeit much more elite school that Holden attends. There is also a direct easter egg, paying homage to the book and his hero. At some point, Max spots a red hunting hat, similar to the one that Holden is wearing for most part of his story, hanging from a rack in a corridor, and makes a comment about it being phony, referencing him. Holden is notorious for his seemingly misanthropic attitude; and you got to love him for calling everyone and everything phony in any given instance. So there you have it, Holden; Max thinks your red hunting hat is phony. I bet that if he knew about this, he would definitely called her phony for calling him phony. There is also another major easter egg, spotted in Max's room in the school - there is a poster on a wall, probably of a movie called *The Winger and the Cow*. Both the title and the style of the poster resemble the cover of the original edition of *The Catcher In the Rye*.

But it is not only with tangible stuff that *Life Is Strange 1* is conversing with *The Catcher In The Rye*. Major themes in the game's story, as well as character traits of its heroes, bring Salinger's iconic novel to mind.

In one alternate reality, Chloe, Max's friend, is severely injured in a car accident and later Max pulls her plug, helping her to rest in peace. Assuming that this alternate reality is what actually happened and that what we see in the game as taking place in present time is in fact an alternate reality, we are able to see Max under a different light: arriving back to her hometown, Max is overwhelmed by memories of her friend and her passing away, facts which she obviously, and naturally, cannot get over. Unable to come to terms with reality and move on somehow, she resorts to what possibly

every single human being on earth has said or thought of at least once in their lives. She wishes that she could turn back time so as to change Chloe's fate. She probably wished this so many times that one day all of a sudden she made it happen. Because it would be impossible for her to go on with her life having experienced such a tragic loss, in which she also had a share, the only way to deal with it was to manipulate time and change the events. So it's a dream come true for Max, who is able to rewind time, keep whatever she wants from her peculiar flashbacks and then prepare a present and a future of her liking. But can it be that simple? Of course not. Since Max is not living alone on this planet, and since her actions affect not only herself and Chloe but also several other people, things are destined to escalate sooner or later.

In a similar way, Holden is trying to cover up his real anxieties and fears by dressing them up as contempt for people and society and constantly pretending to be something that he is not. He wants to pass as a bad student but in fact he is very smart and educated. He is supposed to be a misanthropist, but he constantly seeks the human presence around him. Holden's story is generally viewed as one of teenage rebellion, but in fact it is something completely different; reading between the lines, this becomes rather obvious to the trained reader, and it is intensified by the knowledge that Salinger was very protective of his hero and did not allow any adaptation of his novel, probably fearing there would be lots of misinterpretations - which indeed was and still is the case with this genuinely unique story.

Holden narrates his story from a bizarre point of view. We do not know from the start where he is or what he is doing, as he starts revealing fragments of his life that sometimes do not seem coherent. But there is a constant in his story: recurring phrases that appear regularly in several variations, but always in the same spirit: People always think something's all true, people never notice anything, people never believe you, people never give your message to anybody. Not only these phrases are spoken like a mantra, but they also sound as though Holden is trying, through them, to say something about himself using hints, because he may be too scared to talk about it directly. His recurring nightmare about trying to catch the children that are running in the rye field and are about to fall off a cliff symbolizes his inability to get over his little brother's death and his secret wish to be able to turn back time and save him somehow - which again brings us back to Max and her super power. It also hints at his desire to protect innocence, since he couldn't do it with his own.

In a most revealing scene, which is full of hints and innuendos that are mistakenly taken literally, Holden visits a professor of his, Mr Antolini, and, having nowhere else to go since it is very late, decides to stay the night in his apartment. Mr Antolini is an intelligent and educated man, but obviously leads a somewhat strange lifestyle: he is married to a much older and rather unattractive woman, with whom he seems to have no real emotional connection. Still the couple throws parties regularly, as if trying to convince society of their marital happiness. The lady offers Holden some coffee and disappears in another room, leaving him alone with her husband. Moments later, Holden begins to feel dizzy, as Mr Antolini starts a bizarre lecture about intellectuality and how Holden should not resist it and embrace it. His words are carefully chosen so as to hint at his real subject matter which, of course, is far from being educational. Still feeling inexplicably dizzy, the young boy falls asleep only to wake up in the middle of the night to see that Mr Antolini is sitting right next to him, admiring his long legs and stroking his hair. Holden leaves the apartment in panic and, once out on the street, he realizes that his vision is blurred and that he cannot walk straight. Obviously that coffee was not that innocent after all. He manages to collect himself somehow by sort of summoning his dead brother in his thoughts.

Mr Antolini brings to mind the perverted Mr Jefferson from *Life Is Strange 1*, the charismatic but twisted professor of photography who was obsessed with capturing the loss of innocence with his camera. Mr Antolini looks and sounds like a toned-down version of Mr Jefferson - toned-down only because back in the times when he lived, he could not freely express his secret desires. But just like



Mr Antolini attempts to seduce Holden, Mr Jefferson leads Max to his lair and ties her down, planning to turn her into one of his themes and, subsequently, victims. Unlike Max, however, Holden cannot rewind time so as to change reality. Max manages to effectively have Mr Jefferson arrested by using her super power to plan her moves, while Holden ends up in a mental institute, trying to come to terms with himself and all the secrets that he feels forced to keep.

*Life Is Strange 2* moves in a different path story-wise, but again focuses on themes that were explored in the first game. This time the lead characters are two young brothers, Sean and Daniel Diaz, who are forced to abandon their normal life after their father is shot dead and the two of them are accused of murder. They embark on a journey from Seattle to Mexico in a race against time, while having to deal with Daniel's telekinesis, a new-found power which can potentially destroy them or save their lives. Brotherhood, trust, friendship and loyalty are among the cornerstones of the story, but the motifs of the loss of innocence, unavoidable change and maturity, both physical and emotional, play a major role in the game.

So it is no surprise that Holden Caulfield is present in this game too, albeit in a more elaborate and complex way. You may not be able to automatically connect Sean with him, as the overall setting of the story, Sean's background and the odyssey he has to go through with his brother look like they have no common ground with Holden's story or his character, but there is a key chapter in the game, the third one which is titled *Wastelands*, that is, in reality, a story inside the story: an epic tale of struggling with adolescence, adulthood, love and sexuality, centered around a tumultuous but powerful brotherly bond, which marks Sean and Daniel's coming of age in the form of a painful rite of passage. This chapter has a very special atmosphere and development that is pretty similar to Salinger's novel, although again this may not be that obvious on first look or if you play the game in a haste or read the book superficially. The *Life Is Strange* games are very much alike with Salinger's stories: they have so many layers that each scene, each phrase, each word even, may mean many different things.

Like in *Life Is Strange 1*, here too there are references to *The Catcher In The Rye* that are more or less direct. For example, Sean can be seen very early in the game wearing a red beanie and smoking a cigarette, reminding the most common depiction of Salinger's hero, that shows him with his red hunting hat and a cigarette in his mouth. There is also a mural outside the garage at the basement of Sean's home, made by him, that depicts a kraken. The overall drawing style and colours again look similar to the original cover of *The Catcher in the Rye*, just like Max's poster did. In the first pages of Sean's sketchbook, there is a drawing that he made depicting a baseball glove with a ball. This too nods to Holden, who used to carry with him a baseball glove that belonged to his deceased brother, Allie.

Another easter egg referencing Salinger's novel that may pass unnoticed because it is somehow hidden can be found in the house of Sean and Daniel's grandparents. In there, Sean watches the aquarium and comments that he has not seen any fish yet. He asks Daniel to lift a log that is blocking the bed of the tank and reveal the goldfish that had been hiding behind it. D. B., Holden's brother, is a writer who became successful with a book that he wrote, titled *The Secret Goldfish*.

But the references that are contextual and have to do with the essence of the story are the most important. There is a recurring theme that shows up in the second chapter, *Rules*. In a segment in *The Catcher In The Rye*, Holden is sitting on the backseat of a taxi that drives through New York on a cold winter day. He keeps wondering what happens in winter to the ducks that swim in the Central Park lagoon in the spring; where do the ducks go when the lake freezes. Of course it is a question that no one can answer, because no one cares about the ducks; but for Holden, it is essential that he knows about them, as they stand for several things in his mind. The cycle that the ducks follow, appearing in spring then somehow disappearing in winter, is like the circle of life and the inevitable



changes that come as time passes. As Holden sees the lake frozen with no ducks, he fears that maybe a spring will arrive one year, when they will not appear again. In other words, he has lost his innocence already, and he is afraid to grow up and accept himself for what he is, come to terms with his bad experiences and proceed to adult life and maturity. Another parameter has to do with his grief for the death of Allie, his little brother, which he obviously has never gotten over. There are also the incidents from the past years that never stop haunting him: the murder or forced suicide of a fellow student who was obviously gay, the confession of a close friend who was probably sexually abused by her stepfather; and of course Allie's death.

In *Life Is Strange 2*, in the second chapter, *Rules*, Sean and Daniel find shelter in an abandoned house in a forest in Oregon. It is December, the heart of winter, and there is snow everywhere. There are several interesting things in the house, but the most intriguing one is the picture of a duck hanging on the wall above the makeshift bed where the two brothers sleep. Not so coincidentally, there are flying ducks depicted on Daniel's sweater in this section. Later on, in their grandparents' house, where Sean and Daniel find refuge for a while, in one of the rooms there is a wooden box with a duck painted on it, and on the box sits a red cap. And there are three sculpted flying ducks decorating the wall near the glass door which leads to the backyard of the house.

Of course the duck images are not randomly placed there. The second one is much more direct, as it is accompanied by the red cap which nods to Holden's hunting hat. But both of them are there as a reference to Salinger's novel and as a symbol in the game, in connection to their original symbolism in the book. And maybe it is also an inside joke that answers Holden's question: the ducks that disappear from Central Park in winter, are kept in Oregon.

Just like Holden, Sean and Daniel are in the process of moving extremely fast from childhood/adolescence to adulthood. Like Holden, they too have lost their innocence, and acceptance of themselves and maturity await for them around the corner. The first duck, the one in the abandoned house, has pale colors, while the second one is bright red; they may very well stand for the "winter" ducks and the "spring" ducks respectively, in Holden's ramblings, while Sean and Daniel get closer to breaking free and moving on. The cabin in the woods and the grandparents' house in *Rules*, the two places where the ducks can be seen, are like passages, leading to the next major step that Sean and Daniel will eventually make when they hop on a train headed to California. Which brings us to *Wastelands*, the aforementioned chapter, where essential changes begin to happen, affecting both themselves and those around them.

Like Holden grieves over his brother's death, Sean has a constant fear of losing Daniel: at first, he is afraid that they will get separated, then he is worried all the time about him maybe not being able to control his power, therefore putting himself in danger. This fear inevitably becomes reality in episode 4, *Faith*, when Sean loses Daniel after a dramatic incident, and subsequently risks everything, including his life, until they are reunited.

This development is foreshadowed in an ominous dream that Sean has at the start of the fourth episode, where he sees himself sitting with Daniel at the top of a cliff, and suddenly Daniel tells him that he is alone and falls off, in a sequence that is one more vivid reference to *The Catcher In The Rye*, as it is connected to Holden's dream about being in a rye field, trying to catch the little children as they are about to fall off the cliff so as to keep them safe, and hence the innocence that he lost, and his inability to deal with Allie's death.

In this specific context, Sean identifies with Holden, as he himself becomes the "Catcher" who is desperately trying to save little Daniel from falling off the cliff. In the same context, Daniel has his literal identity as Sean's brother, symbolizing the blood link that connects them and that Sean fears

of losing, but he also represents the lost innocence for both himself and Sean, identifying with the allegory of the children in Holden's dream.

12 January 2020

## ELEMENTS OF THE ARCHETYPICAL FAIRY TALE IN *RESIDENT EVIL 7*



Video games are like fairy tales of the new era; a good amount of them follow the structure of classic fairy tales, but in some this is extremely dominant, resulting in being an essential part of their plot, their mood and the development of their characters. *Bioshock: Infinite* is a very characteristic case, which I analyzed in a previous article, and *Resident Evil 7* shares a similar trait: it is built around the logic of an archetypical fairy tale, including in its plot several such elements as crucial axes.

Fairy tales in general, and specifically those that are or based on folk material, no matter where they originate from, have a few standards as far as both their plots and their characters are concerned: there are some good characters, some villains who usually chase and wish to kill the good characters, there is someone (most of the times, but not always, a girl) who is locked in some sort of prison, sometimes there is a cruel giant, a witch, an evil stepmother with an equally evil daughter, other times there is a knight or prince who arrives at just the right moment to kill the villains and free the imprisoned girl. A mysterious house is a place of interest in several tales, together with its strange residents - whether those are humans, animals or creatures that belong to another world, doesn't really matter although it may make a difference as far as the development of the plot is concerned.

What usually dominates is an evil force; one which may have numerous manifestations in a tale: the aforementioned evil antagonists are such a case, also a supernatural and very powerful entity can represent it, while sometimes all the aspects of evil can co-exist in the same story. In *Resident Evil 7*, the spirit of evil that dominates Ethan's story, is Eveline, the bioweapon that takes human forms, first appearing as a lost little girl, then transforming into an old, seemingly harmless invalid woman who seems to be everywhere in the Baker family home where the story unfolds. Eveline, who slyly invaded the house a while back, infected the members of the family, turning them into monstrous, cannibalistic creatures with absolutely no sense of humanity inside and about them, making them carriers of evil.

Snow White and the Sleeping Beauty were metaphorically imprisoned, as they were doomed to remain asleep for a long time. Rapunzel was literally imprisoned, high up in a huge tower. In *Resident Evil 7*, the role of the imprisoned princess initially belongs to Mia, whom Ethan finds literally asleep in the dark and gloomy dungeons of the Baker property grounds, among suspicious-looking stuffed bags and weird tools. During the same time, Ethan has the role of the liberator prince or knight; instead of on a white horse, he arrives in a fancy car, and he does not find a castle or tower but a grim guest house. The rescue process goes anything but well, as Mia, possessed by Eveline, unexpectedly abandons the role of the victim/princess and takes that of the bad witch, attacking Ethan viciously and subsequently attempting to kill him. Eventually Ethan stops being her

rescuer, and is forced to attack her so as to save his life. At the end of a frustrating battle between them in the attic of the guest house, Jack Baker arrives and drags an unconscious Ethan in his actual "castle": the family's house, where Ethan comes face to face with its inhabitants: Jack, Marguerite and Lucas. He also indirectly meets the family's daughter, Zoe, infected as well but much less than the others and is able to control herself, who promises to help him escape.

Jack is the fairy tale's giant - a terrifying and merciless cannibal who is constantly hungry for human flesh. When he walks around the house looking for Ethan, he is reminiscent of the giant who returns home and senses that there is a human hiding somewhere because he can tell of their scent. Later on after he mutates, he becomes a literal giant, a huge, monstrous creature that is uncontrollable in its appetite and attacks.

The dragon Jack establishes his position in the main house, while Marguerite guards the old house and Lucas locks himself up in what used to be the barn and storage area. The main house is filled with traps, monsters and intimidating doors decorated with dead animals, and to be able to escape from there, Ethan has to find three key items that unlock the exit and fight against Jack in the basement and temporarily defeat him. Then, following Zoe's plan, he goes to the old house where he has to evade Marguerite's tricks and eventually confront her in the greenhouse. Marguerite, whose mutation involves giving birth to giant flies and swarms of spiders, gradually identifies herself with her insects, growing extremely long arms and legs, additionally developing her cannibalistic habits even more, which is also an attribute of a specific genre of fly. Her attacks are vicious, and she grows a particularly wild appetite for Ethan's family jewels. Of course this is not random; as she gradually strips off her human nature, the primordial instincts come forward; but her cannibalistic tendency messes with her lustful appetite and she wants to devour Ethan for real. At this point, she borrows the trait of her husband and expresses a hunger for human flesh, therefore taking herself the role of the giant since he is temporarily out of the picture.

The role of Lucas Baker in this dark fairy tale is a complex and twisted one. Although Ethan does not belong to the dragon Jack's family, he and Lucas seem to be two sides of the same coin. In several fairy tales, there is a beautiful and kind maiden, unlucky enough to be the stepdaughter of an evil witch who also has a daughter of her own, a girl who is ugly and wicked like her mother. This girl is generally aware of her unpleasant physical appearance, but prefers to turn a blind eye to this fact and instead play along her mother's various devices that aim at making her believe that she is pretty. At some point, the beautiful girl sits on a tall tree with a well below it, and the ugly girl goes to the well to get water; she sees the reflection of the pretty girl and thinks that it is her own. When the revelation comes, the ugly, evil girl hates the pretty, kind girl even more, and does everything to humiliate and/or exterminate her.

With Lucas taking the part of the ugly, evil child, Ethan becomes his counterpart - the male version of the kind, beautiful maiden. Although we can never see Ethan's face, we can assume that he is good-looking; a fair-haired young man with white skin, obviously coming from a rather well off urban environment, whose life was undoubtedly happy until he got involved in this nightmare. Lucas does have a natural sister, Zoe, but her role in this fairy tale is that of the companion and helper of the hero: she is the one who guides him via phone calls and offers him valuable assistance during his quests. From the moment when Zoe escaped the Baker family home, distancing herself from her disturbing family, she became an outsider; and she is literally one, since she is never seen actually getting inside the house, unlike Ethan who wanders around getting to know every single room and secret passage in there. Zoe, with her medical knowledge, is also the positive counterpart of her mother - Marguerite is the evil witch while Zoe is the good witch who performs "magic" for a good cause and creates "spells" that are able to rid of "curses": she uses two objects with magical significance - a head and an arm - to create the serum which will be used to free herself and Mia from the virus with which they have been infected.

Lucas, unlike his parents, never transforms into a monster in the main game; Ethan has to deal with his human form only, but this does not correspond to a typical boss fight. The son of the Baker family is playing hide and seek in the chaotic and mazy storage area, where he has set up all sorts of twisted and lethal traps in order to torture and eventually kill his victims. Ethan is forced to fight several monsters and go weaponless through a stressing trial before he is able to take back one of the valuable ingredients for the serum, which Lucas has stolen. So just like in the fairy tales, the evil character is constantly trying to prevent the good protagonist to reach his goal, which now is to save both his wife and Zoe whom Lucas abducted in the meantime.

At this point, Ethan still carries the role of the liberator/knight, but it won't be long until this condition is reversed, because after he leaves the Baker property with either Mia or Zoe, the fairy tale takes an unexpected turn: Ethan becomes the male counterpart of the imprisoned princess, and Mia acts the part of the knight who battles all sorts of evil forces in order to save him. Eveline traps Ethan in a cocoon in the wrecked ship in an attempt to keep manipulating Mia; but Mia, who still has her free will, manages to liberate her husband and nearly sacrifices herself in order to make sure he will be safe.

Puzzles and trials many times form the core of fairy tales, and this is one more element that makes video games relate to them so strongly. Ethan's story is full of both, and most of them are dangerous and cunning. The main house itself is one big puzzle, as nearly all of its passages are locked and Ethan has to look for keys to open the intimidating doors that block them. There are items hidden in bathtubs, grandfather clocks, books, corpses even. The basement of the house is yet one more puzzle, accessed through more than one entrances, that has been transformed into a huge slaughterhouse.

Although the main house of the Bakers is the dominant environment, it is in fact the old house that is the most compelling and iconic stage of action. Broken wooden floors, hidden crawlspaces, melted candles, torn wallpapers, swarms of bugs and flies that either fly around or hang on nests, a secret altar with items that echo the voodoo ceremonies of the rural Louisiana, where the story takes place, bridges decorated with dolls and doll heads, an abandoned greenhouse with wild vegetation, narrow passages filled with crawlers, vintage objects that are used as pieces of puzzles, like a wooden crank or an oil lamp, are only some of the elements that describe the chilling atmosphere of the old house, which is Marguerite's domain. If the main house was a death trap, the old house is like a witch's lair, where any intruder is unwelcome.

The old house is partly the fairy tale's maze; although not a literal labyrinth, its setting is equally confusing due to the many doors, locked passages and similar-looking rooms. Ethan has to cross its hostile grounds several times, while being hunted by Marguerite and her bugs, as he is looking for a series of items that will lead him to one of the ingredients that Zoe has requested. Prior to getting inside the old house, however, Ethan has the chance to watch a revealing video cassette which shows Mia wandering around the place while Marguerite is looking for her. This creepy footage offers some hints as to where he should go and what he could look for in order to solve the many puzzles of the old house. Marguerite appears eventually, unleashing her bugs to make him go away from her realm and blocking his path on several occasions. Ethan has to find ways to outsmart her in order to complete his exploration, but it is not until he faces her mutated form and kills her that he is able to find the ingredient for the serum.

The less fairy tale-looking environment is the wrecked ship, a stage that somehow switches the story back to reality with its grim grey/blue colors that contrast the faded sepia/yellow tones of the Baker family property sceneries. It is interesting that after Mia's part is complete on the ship and we return to the Baker house with Ethan again, the colors of those areas are not sepia/yellow anymore;

their tone resembles more that of the ship; and additionally, the whole look in the guest house, which was the very first area that Ethan explored when he arrived, is now like it belongs to a hallucination. The atmosphere is dense and thick, Ethan has disturbing visions on his way, and eventually he finds himself back up in the attic where it all began - where he had that very first battle with the possessed Mia. Now it is Eveline waiting for him there, taking her human forms before she reveals the literal monster that she really is: a huge mutant that has taken over the guest house and whatever is around it, a creature of unidentified identity that reeks of poison, destruction and death, the personification of Evil in its most extreme form. Like in fairy tales, Evil is defeated in the end and Good prevails, but as we know Evil never actually dies for good, always finding ways to resurrect itself from its ashes.

31 January 2021



## THE PSYCHOSEXUAL SUBTEXT OF *RESIDENT EVIL: VILLAGE*



*Resident Evil: Village* is centered around Ethan Winters's nightmarish journey to find his abducted daughter Rosemary, however there are several other themes explored in the game on a secondary level that, however, add a lot to the story and the development of its characters. While Mother Miranda is the prominent evil mastermind, her four "children", the four lords of the village, are in fact the characters who give the tone of the adventure and the ones who, in the end, are the most memorable. When it comes to sexual imagery in particular, the obvious thought would be Alcina Dimitrescu, but in fact she is a red herring on the matter, as the essence of this subject lies somewhere else.

As Ethan is about to enter the Castle Dimitrescu, he is captured by Carl Heisenberg and brought to a peculiar council consisting of Miranda and her four children. It is the only time when he has the chance to see all the villains gathered together, and moreover while they are arguing about who is going to be the one to carry out his execution. Sounds like an evil child's game, which isn't random if we consider that Miranda, by having condemned these four individuals to be a part of her experiments, she has essentially shattered their personality and their own free will, and while they feel super powerful thanks to their unusual abilities, in fact they are just puppets in the hands of their "mother".

The whole scene looks like a grotesque act performed by a circus of freaks, and it would have been marginally hilarious if it wasn't so chillingly creepy. Alcina and Heisenberg are the most loud; each one of them makes it very clear that they want to be the one to kill Ethan. Their over-confidence is more than obvious and they feel much superior to their other two siblings. The badly disfigured Salvatore Moreau limits himself to getting close to Ethan to have a better look at his potential prey while whimpering like a whiny baby. And then there is Donna Beneviento. She can be seen sitting in a corner, her face covered with a black veil, never speaking a word while her creepy puppet Angie, controlled by her, rushes forward to have a look at Ethan as well, in a bold, unafraid and sadistic way. Donna looks like a silent stalker, patiently waiting for her prey to fall in her hands.

Donna Beneviento is an extremely intriguing character, one that definitely deserved more game time and more details revealed about her past and her family. But even what we do know about her and, mainly, what we see, understand and decipher as the story unfolds, is enough to make her stand out among the villains and end up being one of the most iconic characters in the *Resident Evil* saga. On first look, she is not easy to read. In her notes, Miranda characterizes Donna as mentally underdeveloped, which is the main reason why she could not be a good host for her daughter, Eva. Donna has the appearance of a grown woman, but mentally and sentimentally she is still a child. An insecure, lonely child, but at the same time a child with vicious, twisted instincts. Donna's backstory is a tragedy, something that can be reflected in her overall appearance and attitude. Born an aristocrat, she lost her parents at a very tender age, when they both committed suicide. Her mental

health issues prevented her from becoming more social in her teen and early adult years, finding solace strictly in making dolls, a craft that she had learned from her father. Her only companion was a girl named Claudia, who belonged to Donna's bloodline but no one knew for sure whether she was Donna's sister or maybe her daughter, most probably an illegitimate one, if this was indeed the case. Claudia is buried in the Benevento Flowerbed, a private cemetery just outside the entrance to the grounds of the residence.

Growing up, Donna's obsession with dolls and doll-making became even stronger. She also studied a lot in her mansion's rich library, and she became an expert on the local plants and flowers, learning to locate those that were poisonous, and use them to create mixtures that caused heavy hallucinations. As a side-effect of Miranda's experiments on her, she developed the ability to control inanimate objects with her mind, something that she took advantage of in order to manipulate her dolls around. She especially became attached to Angie, a very special puppet / doll, which looked like a skeletal figure, was dressed in bridal rags and the architecture of her face resembled a lot the Benevento family's crest, the sun / moon complex.

Donna's obsession with dolls is a major element of her character and an axis around which her whole personality revolves. According to Sigmund Freud, children subconsciously use the dolls as a means to indirectly express erotic and aggressive fantasies. The doll is a small object, therefore is much closer, as an image, to what the child sees in the mirror and, subsequently, much easier to identify with. With the dolls, children create an imaginary world where they hope to feel satisfied and happy, while at the same time attempting to explore aspects of the adult world. According to Rainer Maria Rilke, however, the doll acts as a safety belt for the child who would feel lost and alone if cast out in the wild world. But exactly because the doll is an object with which the child can easily familiarize, their identities get mixed and the erotic element becomes prominent again. Sometimes children treat dolls with viciousness and this, from the aspect of psychoanalysis, is an aftereffect of the subconscious, premature yearning for a sexual partner. Donna's attitude reflects all this, adding a most powerful sexual imagery in the story. Alcina and her daughters may look promiscuous and revealing with their seemingly saucy attitude towards Ethan, but in reality they only want blood. Donna, on the other hand, neither speaks nor moves, but the way she traps Ethan in her twisted, morbid game is overloaded with psychosexual nuances.

Dolls were prominent in yet one more *Resident Evil* game, where again they were linked to a disturbing sexual behavior: Alfred Ashford in *Code Veronica* had his secret palace filled with vintage dolls, plus one giant and very creepy dismembered one hanging from the ceiling at the entrance hall. Although the house used to be inhabited by a girl as well in the past - Alfred's twin sister Alexia - it is rather clear that, now at least, it is Alfred who is obsessed with dolls, given how he keeps them around the rooms standing like silent guardians: seemingly harmless but not the least terrifying. Being very close to his sister as a young boy, he developed an unhealthy obsession with her as a teenager. After her supposed death, Alfred took on the habit of wearing her dresses and a wig that resembled her hair and strolling around the house pretending to be Alexia. To be more precise, he did not only pretend to be his sister, but he would actually "become" her when in female disguise. The dolls kind of substituted her actual presence in the house, while at the same time they maybe signified Alfred's hidden desire to have his sister as a living doll instead of her obviously being the dominant and omnipotent twin when she was alive.

Being Donna's literal creation, Angie is a medium that is used to express her master's mood and feelings. While Donna is silent and motionless, Angie is talkative, sassy and restless. Here we have a peculiar inversion: the puppet acts like a living person, while the human adapts the attributes of a doll. Donna identifies with Angie on multiple levels and the way that she chooses to express herself through the doll is different every time. For Donna, Angie mainly acts as a substitute for Claudia but on a second - and maybe much stronger - level, the doll represents a complex combination of

Donna's primitive maternal instinct and her carnal attraction to the opposite sex. The most obvious manifestation of the combination of these two symbolic attributes in Angie is the doll's appearance: she looks like a little kid, but she wears a grown woman's bridal gown.

In the secluded and spooky Beneviento residence, Ethan becomes the forbidden fruit. He is pretty much like McBurney in the iconic movie *The Beguiled* (Don Siegel, 1971). Deprived of his weapons, he becomes a victim to whatever sick plans Donna has in mind. She begins by trapping him in her workshop, in the basement of the mansion, and there she creates a haunting string of hallucinations where Ethan's wife, Mia, appears as a giant wooden doll with several items hidden in parts of her body. Ethan hears Mia crying or talking to him, he finds her wedding ring, the music box that was a gift from a relative for their wedding, a photographic film including snapshots connected to his family life, then a baby's cradle, which subsequently breaks, hidden even deeper at the bottom of a well in a second basement. Donna attempts to sentimentally and psychologically break him by bringing up painful memories connected to his family, while at the same time she makes sure that the atmosphere in the house is scary enough to keep him under control. Eventually she creates the hallucination of a giant, cannibalistic embryo, a morbid and horrifying mockery of Rosemary, which is chasing Ethan around the house threatening to kill him.

And this is when Donna shows up and it's the one and only time when she speaks to Ethan directly, telling him that she can't let him leave. At this point, she still appears with her head covered, although she is on her own grounds and there is a portrait on a wall depicting her holding Angie, where her face fully shows. By choosing to appear like this in front of Ethan, she avoids eye-contact with him which would possibly lead to her not feeling secure enough to go on with her game. Determined to keep him there, she makes him chase her in the residence's rooms, although Ethan is actually seeing Angie floating around and hiding in several places in the mansion, forcing him to take part in a morbid hide-and-seek game. The only thing that Ethan can do to attempt to defeat Donna is to stab Angie with a pair of scissors; but in reality, he is actually chasing and stabbing Donna herself.

The scissors is again a strong sexual symbol with many nuances and Ethan's action of using it as a tool to overpower Donna works, for her, as a substitute for the sexual act. This sequence can potentially become even more intense if Ethan fails to find Angie in time; if this happens, the dolls around him grow blades which make them look like mechanical spiders, and stab him with mania, and of course it is in fact Donna again who attacks and stabs him, once more creating a hallucination involving the dolls. Notably, the first time that Ethan finds and stabs Angie, the doll bites him. Knowing that it is actually Donna who does this, the whole scene takes a completely different perspective, seen through the prism of Freud's theory about children using the dolls to express aggressive erotic fantasies. Donna may not be technically a child anymore, but her psyche is stuck in a problematic and sad childhood, something that obviously keeps defining her actions even in her adult life.

Up to the point where Ethan arrives at Donna's house and after he escapes from there, his role is standard and specific: he is the protective father figure and Rosemary's rescuer. But for the time that he spends inside the Beneviento mansion, his role changes dramatically. He becomes a potential game partner for Donna who, due to her emotional clinging to childhood, employs childish tricks (the hide-and-seek game) and objects (the dolls) in order to lure him towards her, which subsequently leads to Ethan acquiring one more role: that of the object of Donna's sexual desires. Donna's sick inner child views Rosemary as an antagonist, something that is intensified by Angie's reactions every time that Ethan grabs her and stabs her, but Donna as a grown woman also views Mia as an antagonist, and this is manifested mainly in the way that she chose, in the workshop hallucination, to present Mia as a grotesque giant puppet. After Ethan kills Donna by stabbing Angie with the scissors and all hallucinations are gone both inside and around the Beneviento

estate, the basement of the mansion still remains off-limits to him. From a Freudian aspect, the basement represents the memory storage: a place where past images are stacked and remain there abandoned and seemingly forgotten but still affecting the person involved.

The whole stage that takes place in the Benevento residence is on a much different pace from the rest of the game, and it is several levels creepier and scarier because it is built around psychological horror. It is pretty similar to *The Evil Within's* chapter *The Cruellest Intentions*, not only as far as its atmosphere and setting are concerned but also because in both cases the memories of the protagonists are mixed with those of their stalkers. This is a feature that is always present in *The Evil Within*, but in that specific chapter it reaches its climax because memories become more personal for the stalker, just as is the case with Donna in *Village*. Story-wise, Donna has many things in common with Ruben Victoriano, Sebastian's stalker in *The Evil Within*. She is playing with Ethan's memories by infiltrating them and placing herself in them by force. By presenting to him the human-sized Mia doll, it is as if she is implying that she, being a doll-maker, actually created Mia for him, and because it was her (Donna) who, as the creator, would breathe life into the doll, she would turn Mia into a host for her own manifestation and, indirectly, her own suppressed and undeveloped sexuality. From the moment when Donna appears in front of Ethan and establishes her own role as Angie's puppet master and, in a wider sense, as the one who pulls the strings in her domain, the child's play begins to transform to a sexual game, at which point Ethan stops being Donna's game partner and his role as the object of her sexual desire is the one that prevails in the end.

12 August 2022

## THE SON OF THE REVOLUTION



Just like the exquisite gem *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, *Assassin's Creed: Unity* can also be considered a cultish treasure already, albeit for different reasons. I know, because I initially had this impression myself, that *Unity* can feel confusing and infuriating when you start playing it for the first time, what with its exhaustingly frustrating map, its weirdly designed gameplay and its problematic combat system. But once you get to know it better, and believe me, it's all worth the while, it rewards you with a brilliant story and some of the most memorable characters that you will ever come across in video games of this kind.

*Assassin's Creed: Unity* takes place during the years that preceded and followed the French Revolution, focusing on Arno Dorian, a young man whose evolution as an Assassin is anything but conventional. Arno was born in a noble family but he was doomed to carry a heavy load from a very tender age, after witnessing his father's shocking murder. On the same day, he met Elise, a girl of his age, with whom he connected instantly and who was destined to become his childhood companion and his love interest later on, as her father, Francois de la Serre, took him under his protection and raised him alongside his daughter as his own son. What Arno didn't know was that Elise's father was the Grand Master of the Templar Order and since his own father had been an Assassin in life, theoretically they were enemies. De La Serre, however, was a fair and open-minded man, in spite of his status, and he even considered truce with the Assassin Brotherhood, something that was extremely frowned upon within the Templar Order. Although de la Serre knew who Arno's father was, this did not prevent him from taking the little boy under his wing and offering him protection and education without ever attempting to convert Arno into a Templar, instead encouraging the boy's freedom of will.

At an important soirée in Versailles, de La Serre is killed by two mysterious men and Arno, who happens to witness the crime, gets unjustly accused of the murder. He is sent to the Bastille, a literal Hell on earth during those times, where he comes across Pierre Bellec, a fellow prisoner and Master Assassin, who used to be a close friend and mentor of Arno's father. Arno had not been aware of his own special traits until then (namely his eagle vision and high intelligence) and it is Bellec who, after an eventful first meeting, makes him realise the truth about himself.

Coming across Bellec looks like a blessing for Arno, as when the Revolution breaks and they manage to escape, he is accepted in the Paris Brotherhood thanks to his new friend who also becomes his mentor. As it turns out in due course, however, Bellec has a very specific view on how the Brotherhood should function, which comes to direct conflict with the late de La Serre's wish for truce. Fearing that Elise, being her father's successor in the Templar Order, would possibly follow along the same philosophy as him, and, most importantly, being horrified by the sentimental influence that she might have on Arno, he goes as far as to attempt to frame Elise for the murder of Mirabeau, the leader of the Brotherhood, whom Bellec himself poisoned because he shared de la



Serre's radical views. This is a very crucial plot point, because after the events take this dramatic turn, Arno is forced to kill Bellec, essentially against his own wishes, and from that moment and on, he finds himself constantly facing the Brotherhood Masters who had always been sceptical about him, but Bellec's trust in the boy worked as a guarantee for Arno towards them. With Bellec gone, Arno becomes more responsible for his own actions and decisions, which, albeit not being always the right ones, nonetheless bring him each time closer to a higher level of emotional and spiritual maturity.

Such Bildungsroman elements are not uncommon in story-rich video games; and Arno seems to be a character who, by definition, would be an ideal protagonist in a tale like the one that *Unity* narrates. Arno's activity is set in an environment that originates in the epic novels of Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas, something that is evident not only in the most obvious aspect - the setting - but also in its story and, most importantly, its characters, both main and secondary. Le Roi des Thunes, Aloys La Touche, Marie Levesque, Frederic Rouille, carry this fascinating heritage of literary heroes who were born from the inspiration of those classic novelists and everything about their appearance, attitude and development is directly connected to it.

Cunning criminals (the dreaded King of Beggars with the painted face) or individuals who were either deceived and were forced to abandon a decent life for the sake of a much more esteemed position in the underworld of Paris (ex tax assessor La Touche who became a cruel, pitiful henchman), or who slyly threaded their way in high society so as to gain money and status (the cold and ruthless Marie Levesque), or who were disappointed by those whom they thought friends and resorted to extremities so as to establish themselves as saviours of the people (the murderous and bloodthirsty Rouille), these characters form a sensational background for the story that unfolds at the forefront. Historical figures like Maximilien Robespierre, Napoleon Bonaparte, Comte de Mirabeau, Louis Michel le Peletier, le Marquis de Sade, play important roles in the story, their real-life actions cleverly blended with fiction, as is always the case with the *Assassin's Creed* games.

There is something brilliantly twisted about the story of *Unity* and its development, and this is directly connected to its protagonist - it even seems to stem from him. Arno combines the charm of an unpretentious carelessness with a deep and conscious sense of altruism and a constant longing for happiness in life. He is also very adaptive, and can cleverly thread his way when needed, but at the same time his sentimentality can sometimes cost him a lot. This combination of opposite elements that shape him as a character somehow define and determine not only the development of the story but also the reactions of the people he deals with. We can see how Bellec is instantly attracted to Arno - on a metaphorical, symbolic level - the first time he sets eyes on him in the prison cell. Bellec is much older, far more experienced, has been through thick and thin in his life, but Arno's social innocence captivates him so much that he finds himself forced to progressively tone down his aggressive attitude for the sake of a more appropriate fatherly approach towards the boy. Arno's instinct assures him that Bellec's aggressiveness is nothing more than a not so well-covered expression of love and caring, which is why he never talks back to the man and just obeys him with respect. This lack of an equally aggressive response from Arno's part is subconsciously interpreted by Bellec as a weakness and a sign of a potential future sentimental and practical submission, leading to him softening his own manner towards the boy, but at the same time giving him too much self-confidence when the time comes to demand from Arno to choose sides.

Arno is an open book; he never hides his feelings and is always sincere and honest. Him being a bit too emotional is quickly balanced by his thoughtfulness and sense of justice. With the bright red, dark blue and glorious white colors almost constantly on his outfits, he is essentially representing the free spirit of France which is always attractive and sensational. Superior forms of all kinds want to conquer it and suppress it, and Bellec, having a higher rank in the Brotherhood than Arno, is one of them. Arno is pure, honest and unaffected by the evil around him, something that captivates



Bellec partly because it reminds him of his own younger self, but also because he sees in Arno someone whom he can shape and educate through a fascinating emotional growth. Arno's passion can never be tamed, but his insight guides him to employ it only to do good. Bellec, on the other hand, although equally passionate and devoted to his cause, seems to have been unable to resist a fair share of brainwashing and corruption that led to him to progressively see himself as the Brotherhood's saviour. In his mission to clean the Assassin ranks, he wants Arno to accompany him, essentially demanding that he renounces everything and everyone and join him without having second thoughts.

Although technically on the side of Good, Bellec is however the kind of person who will easily resort to violence and will not hesitate to put anyone whom he considers dangerous for the brotherhood's cause out of the picture, no matter the means. Killing Mirabeau is a great example of this, but framing Elise is the most characteristic and extreme. On an allegorical level, Bellec yearns for Arno and by extension for what he stands for: the ever-charming, free-spirited and proud people of France. There is a subtle hint of physical attraction from his part as well, if you notice certain nuances in his speech and his eyes on specific occasions while he is talking to Arno, something that works symbolically to further highlight Bellec's urge to have his way because he believes that it is the best for the Brotherhood and France. Both on a personal and a symbolic level, he longs to conquer Arno's free spirit and own control over it, by attempting to make him succumb. Bellec is a very interesting, multi-levelled character who may be essentially Arno's mentor and guardian, but at the same time he is trying to patronize him and make him reject whomever diverts him from his course, essentially Elise. In Bellec's eyes, Elise, being a Templar, is an enemy by default but mainly she is the only one capable of taking Arno away from him. And this is exactly where Bellec makes the biggest mistake, when he attempts to turn Arno against Elise and when this fails, he even goes as far as to threaten to kill her before Arno's eyes, not taking into consideration that Elise is a person not only very dear to Arno but she also grew up with him and they learned to love and care for each other with a very special bond which cannot be easily broken, and which essentially goes beyond the two of them belonging to opposite sides.

If Arno represents the spirit of France, Elise stands for France as a notion, nodding to Marianne, the symbol of the French democracy. Regardless, being a Templar, Elise is considered an enemy because France has many times sided with not so good forces for a purpose. As an individual, she is somewhat frivolous, and even got to the point when she consciously cheated on Arno. Arno, as the people, is always pure and faithful to her - and, by extension, to his homeland - and will choose to consciously forgive her unfaithfulness. Just like Kyra in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, Elise is on the hunt for the man who harmed her family and she is driven by her desire for revenge. But unlike with Kyra's case, which is very personal, in Elise's case things are far more complex. In the end, Elise leaves Arno to die so as to kill Germain, the silversmith who was revealed to be the Grand Master of the Templars and also the man who had her father murdered, and Arno is saved only thanks to his will to rush and help her. Because people are always ready to die for their homeland, but the homeland does not always appreciate this sacrifice. Being an allegory of France both as physical presence and spirit, Elise cannot exist without Arno, therefore the people of France; when during the dramatic finale of the story Elise decides to act alone, her fatal choice leads to her brutal and untimely death. While Arno - the people, therefore the spirit and soul of the nation - manages to survive and subsequently move on.

But Elise had shown signs of controlled cruelty before, when during hers and Arno's encounter with Robespierre she did not hesitate to heavily wound the latter by shooting him in the face, resulting in him being unable to defend himself and subsequently getting arrested. We know that this is something that Arno would never do, but this spot-on scene is exactly and essentially where we clearly see the line that is drawn between the Templars and the Assassins in the saga's lore. No matter how fair and just De La Serre was, no matter how well he raised Elise, both he and his

daughter never ceased to be Templars. As an Assassin, Arno would have resorted to less violent means to extract the truth from Robespierre, more so since they needed him alive in order to be able to give them the information they were seeking.

*Unity* is very unique in its universe because it takes place during a particularly dark and grim period of history, and this is something that, although it had potential to have been explored even more thoroughly in the game, is still a well-depicted element that exists both in the story and the overall atmosphere, hovering like an ominous aura. The overcrowded streets of Paris look stressing and painful to navigate, especially when you are in a hurry, but at the same time this feature highlights the tension, anguish and excitement of the revolution, additionally giving off a constant feeling that things can very well shoot up to extremes at any given moment. There is an overwhelming uneasiness in the central streets, coming to contrast with individual scenes of leisure in high-class cafes and forgotten secluded suburb yards, all this accentuated by the constant presence of swarming crowds around crucial areas of political and social interest, with random scenes of high society citizens getting abruptly arrested by extreme patriots, civilians carrying heads on pikes and parading in the streets, soldiers in panic trying to restore a long-lost order the idea of which has already become too complex and vague, as Arno wanders around a Paris that never ceased to be battered by a succession of extremities - first an absolute, relentless and cruel monarchy, then the explosion of the Revolution and its unavoidable aftermath, followed by the bleak, gloomy years of Robespierre's Reign of Terror.

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## THE LAST ROSE OF ENGLAND



*Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* took the *Assassin's Creed* game series towards a major turn when it was released, mainly because of the fact that it introduced two playable protagonists, each one of whom would have their own share of the game's fascinating story. Set in the heart of Victorian London, with steampunk elements that accentuate its unique atmosphere, the plot of this fantastic video game was centered around two important themes: the elimination of London's Templars including their fearsome Grand Master Crawford Starrick, and the search for a powerful Piece of Eden so as to prevent it from being found and used by the Order. The lead characters and Assassins are Jacob and Evie Frye, twin siblings who had been trained in the circles of the Brotherhood and would always operate together as a team. Unlike most of the Assassins before and after them, Jacob and Evie knew who they were and what they could do since childbirth, being the children of Master Assassin Ethan Frye. This explains how they are able to carry on extremely dangerous and demanding missions in such a tender age: they are just twenty years old, yet their expertise and knowledge would be very hard to surpass.

In spite of the gloomy atmosphere of that specific era's London, what with poverty growing in the slums and the fog occasionally drowning the capital city, the overall feeling that the game gives is that of a throbbing heart: vibrant, feel-good, full of life, an atmosphere that is highlighted even more by its sensational lead characters, their compelling antagonists and their memorable allies. Jacob and Evie have many things in common, but at the same time they are striking opposites. Evie is strategic and thoughtful, planning her moves very carefully before taking action, while Jacob is spontaneous, brash, outspoken and his actions are loud and impressive. A contrast that, however, does not seem to work against their teamwork, since the combination of their different approaches apparently has gotten them that far. Sometimes it is better to act swiftly, some others discretion is the key; this is something that they both know very well, albeit Evie seems to remember it more often than Jacob. The main protagonist is Jacob, but Evie has her fair share of adventuring, exploration and dealing with Templars. Her inclusion in the game was met with enthusiasm (although she is mistakenly considered by many the first playable female Assassin in the series, since there had already been Aveline in 2012's *Liberation*), and three of the game's most well-structured and aesthetically immaculate quests are set to be played by her (namely, *Playing It By Ear*, *A Room With A View* and *Change Of Plans*); the core of the story, however, focuses on Jacob, and he is the character who undergoes the most notable development.

The beginning of the story introduces the two characters in an unforgettable way, mixing all the elements that are going to be present throughout the progression of the plot: action, brilliant dialogue, gorgeous music, immersive settings. It also sets the pace on how each of the two protagonists should be made use of for a more effective gameplay, although this may change depending on how you play: Evie is supposed to be better at stealth, while Jacob's stronger point is combat; this is also hinted by the weapons that the Fryes have at the start: Evie is armed with a

cane-sword, while Jacob has brass knuckles on. As the story unfolds however, you will find that Evie is pretty good at combat too (albeit she is rather weak at countering), and Jacob can carry out extended stealthy sequences with great ease. Hand-to-hand with their predefined combat style, goes the symbolism which they carry as characters.

With her strategic mind, Evie represents the more typical and diplomatic side of Britain, and also that side of the Empire which stands for justice and equality, but wishes those to be gained via peaceful solutions. Her ways, however, may not be always effective or fair. Her relationship with Henry Green is also a very interesting plot point. Being an Indian Assassin using a British identity to stay undercover, Henry is part of an unofficial network that watches over London and works secretly to liberate it from the ruthless gangs that control it under the orders of the Templars. Evie meets Henry and immediately falls under his spell just like the British were charmed by his homeland India. Evie of course does not plan to "conquer" Henry in the way that the British Empire conquered India; regardless, her subsequent interactions with him gradually reveal that she is more ready to take action than he is. Henry is usually one step behind, preferring to work in the shadows; this forces Evie to abandon her stealthy approach from time to time, in order to deal with enemies and situations face to face. Evie and Henry are not a conventional pair; this is evident even in their body language. In spite of her lovely facial features, slender figure and impressive education, Evie's overall posture and temperament are rather rough; her ways of walking and talking are far from delicate and refined. Henry, on the other hand, is very sophisticated and gentle; he moves gracefully and with caution and, although clearly well-trained, would gladly abstain completely from action if he had the option. There is a scene in the memory *Playing It By Ear* where Evie and Henry unlock an underground lair in Edward Kenway's mansion. When the concealed trapdoor opens and they are about to descend, Evie signals Henry to proceed first, to which he obeys with a smile. This simple and momentary move is very indicative of the way that Evie views Henry: she is very aware of his fragility, but does not mind to play the role of the protector; on the contrary, she seems very content with how things have turned out.

Unlike Evie, who seems settled and collected from the start and her character sees minor changes throughout the story, her twin brother Jacob is far more complex, and his development both as a person and an Assassin is quite impressive. As a character, Jacob is radiant and bright; he is beautiful and captivating, just like the imperial Britain in her essence. In fact he *is* Britain; the good side of the Empire, which is vibrant, loud, feisty, wants to come on top but not at the expense of others. He too aims for equality, unity and justice, but wouldn't mind to have a good time in the process. He is brilliant and smart; always ready to drop a sarcastic comment or reply with his characteristically British sense of humor. Jacob embeds Arno Dorian's charm and grace, combined with Edward Kenway's sparkling spirit; traits that never pass unnoticed, and unavoidably he often becomes the center of attention. Jacob's physical presence also carries its symbolism: with his dark hair, white skin, rosy cheeks and green eyes he could be considered the male equivalent of the "English rose", in the tradition of beautiful young heroes of fiction, like George Eliot's Daniel Deronda or Henry Fielding's Tom Jones. Despite his young age, he is socially gifted and has a genuine talent when it comes to approaching people and charming them with his personality and wit. His interactions with Pearl Attaway, Mrs Disraeli or Charles Darwin and his subtle flirting with Alexander Graham Bell, obviously having been impressed himself by the inventor's genius, are quite indicative of this; but it is the effect that he has on the arch-villain Maxwell Roth that is the most interesting and revealing.

Maxwell Roth is the leader of the Blighters, the violent and vicious gang that has been ruling London for quite some time. Roth did not become their leader overnight, which is one of the reasons why he was so impressed by Jacob's fast achieved leadership of his own gang. In a very short time, and in spite of being frowned upon for his initiative by Evie, Jacob managed to recruit an impressive number of civilians to form his gang which he named The Rooks, alluding to one of

London's most prominent symbols, the ravens. Constantly motivated by the passion of their leader, the Rooks soon gained notable notoriety, something that unavoidably caught the attention of Maxwell Roth, who apparently moved heaven and earth to learn everything about his rival awe, Jacob Frye. Eager to meet him and make his acquaintance, he eventually sends him a dinner invitation, to which Jacob replies positively. It becomes clear from the first nanosecond that Jacob finds himself in the same space with Roth, that the leader of the Blighters is already and beyond salvation absolutely smitten with him. You can see it in his eyes, in the way he talks, in the way he looks at Jacob; there is no way this man will be able to avoid his fate. This becomes even more clear when Jacob finds him daydreaming while gazing at a baby crow that he has locked in a cage; the crow's name is Rook, it is a young male, just like Jacob, and the black color of its plumage matches Jacob's dark hair. Seeing the dreamy look in Roth's eyes and the way he snaps out of it after commenting to Jacob that "[the rook] is beautiful, isn't he", it is obvious that, in some twisted fantasy, he envisions Jacob in a similar cage, albeit metaphorically on a subconscious and complex level of his mind.

As Jacob gets more and more involved in Roth's activities, having the chance to get to know him better, he secretly starts to form a strange kind of fondness for his supposed enemy. Although he is a Blighter working for the Templars, Roth seems to have a mindset that pretty much corresponds to the values of the Assassins. He is against restrictions of any kind and ardently supports freedom of will. Some time ago, Crawford Starrick hired Roth to train his men, taking partial control of the Blighters himself, making them his pawns and eventually depriving them of their freedom. This was something that Roth could not stand, as it affected him too, and sought a way to put an end to it by weakening Starrick's forces. Knowing that Jacob was working towards the same end, he had the perfect excuse to approach him and ask for his aid, which he did. On a more personal level, Jacob is attracted by Roth's flamboyant personality and colourful lifestyle and how he always seeks ways to have a good time, something that he too loves so much doing. If Roth wasn't so ruthless, he would have been the ideal companion for Jacob, probably in every sense of the word. But it is exactly Roth's ruthlessness that teaches Jacob where to draw the line between personal freedom and uncontrollable anarchy, a realization that is critical for his future development as a person, a gang leader and an Assassin.

The way that in the end Roth relentlessly slaughters his beloved crow and sends it to Jacob as a gift along with his last invitation leaves space for multiple interpretations. On first look, killing the crow symbolizes the end of their partnership; but a second reading of this action could be even more revealing about how seriously obsessed Roth was with Jacob. For Roth, Rook the young crow was a substitute for Jacob the young Rook. Roth held the crow caged because he could not "cage" Jacob. When Roth revealed that he was willing to stop at nothing and would go as far as to endanger the lives of innocent children in order to do what he wanted, the bond that he had formed with Jacob was abruptly cut. This made him realize that there was no way he could win Jacob's heart after this, leading him to violently kill the crow as an overtly dramatic "either you love me or I kill you" declaration. Jacob was a "homme fatale" for Roth: he totally enslaved the almighty leader of the Blighters not only with his beauty and charm, but also with his skills and intelligence, eventually leading Maxwell to self-destruction. Because although it is Jacob who kills him, the way Roth had set everything up it would be to either be killed by Jacob's hand, or die in the burning theater, taking Jacob with him. There was no way that Roth could have walked out of the theatre alive that night; he did not simply know it, it was how he had it planned in the first place. Jacob might have sealed Roth's fate, but when Roth kissed Jacob lustfully moments before he died, he made sure that Jacob wouldn't come out of all this unaffected. Which he clearly didn't; having the dead Rook now properly embalmed and placed safely in a glass case as a keepsake, at least says something.

Jacob's development as an Assassin is equally interesting as that of his character. Although Evie's role in the story is very important, as her main mission is to find the Piece of Eden with Henry's



assistance, she gets to deal with and kill two Templars only, Dr David Brewster and Lucy Thorne. Dr Brewster was researching another Piece of Eden which proved to be too powerful; working under stress and constant threats, he took his experiments on it a bit too far and at the most critical moment he was killed by Evie, not having the time to maybe avert a massive explosion that followed, destroying the artifact and his laboratory. Lucy Thorne, Starrick's second-in-command, was an expert on the occult and the Pieces of Eden. A highly educated intellectual, she was Evie's rival awe, as they both shared the same passion for research and knowledge. Both Evie's targets are crucial for the progression of the plot, but their assassinations are side activities that essentially support the much harder battle that is the elimination of London's Templars, which is Jacob's part.

Jacob takes on the assassination of powerful Templars who come from different environments and hold crucial positions in society. Rupert Ferris is a ruthless industrialist who unashamedly drinks the blood of his poor factory workers; Dr John Elliotson, once a brilliant heart surgeon, is now a deranged scientist who doesn't hesitate to sacrifice the lives of his patients in the name of research, while distributing a dangerous and toxic drug in the open market, following Starrick's orders; Pearl Attaway, intelligent and skillful but ruthless, controls part of the transportation and seeks more power for herself, secretly working with Starrick who is revealed to be her cousin; Philip Twopenny is a greedy, cold-hearted banker who takes advantage of his position in order to steal money from the people; Lord Cardigan is a corrupt politician who still lives in the glory of his military past; and Maxwell Roth is the aforementioned leader of the Blighters. With the exception of Roth, with whom Jacob was personally involved and his assassination was not strictly associated with the elimination of the Templars, Jacob's targets are people who control society, finance and politics, which means that their deaths would inevitably have serious consequences. Even so, it is not random that it is him who takes on this challenging operation. Through all his high-rank Templars, Starrick had such a huge influence in every aspect of life in London, that it would be impossible to even attempt to weaken him by following a more strategic but time-consuming plan, which was probably Evie's intention at the beginning. This is a fact that is further supported by what Roth says at some point to Jacob, that every time they hesitate to strike, Starrick becomes even more powerful as he gains more time for his plans. Although Evie keeps judging Jacob severely for his up-front and audacious methods, it is his swift and daring reactions that result in a much faster elimination of the problem, giving both of them the opening they needed to deal with and defeat Starrick once and for all.

As a hero of fiction, Jacob goes through his own emotional coming-of-age, gradually blooming - like the rose that he is - into an intellectually mature young man, who is even more capable of dealing with the challenges that are integral part of an Assassin's life. This is clearly shown during his brief but determining appearance in the *Jack The Ripper* story which takes place twenty years after the events in the main game. He has become a respected Master Assassin and he is now more settled and compassionate, more able to control his impetuosity and to know when it is time to follow his instinct and when to give things more thought. Jacob's evolution is even more impressive if you compare it to Evie's notable change after those twenty years have passed. Although she maintains her serious and solemn attitude, it is obvious that she has finally come to peace with the fact that sometimes raw and direct action is the only way possible; or at least the only effective way.

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